

FROM ALIENATION TO HARMONY:  
A MODEL FOR FAMILY  
RECONCILIATION

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## ABSTRACT

### FROM ALIENATION TO HARMONY: A MODEL FOR FAMILY RECONCILIATION

by  
Yolanda R. Bethea  
United Theological Seminary, 2023

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The project context was the New Psalmist Baptist Church, Baltimore, Maryland. The project aimed to increase knowledge and develop skills for family reconciliation. Sixty-five million plus Americans suffer from family estrangement.<sup>1</sup> There is no current support within the context for estranged persons and to help them move from relational alienation to harmony. The project tested the hypothesis that if participants engage in Bible study that focuses on the spiritual discipline of reconciliation, they will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to increase harmony and decrease alienation with their family members. The research supported the hypothesis.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Pillemer, *Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them* (New York, NY: Avery, 2020), 24.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you to my United Theological Seminary doctoral mentors—Bishop Lisa Weah, DMin; Reverend Carl Solomon, DMin; Reverend Lucius Dalton, DMin; and Rychie Breidenstein, Ph.D.—who guided me, read my work, and provided critical feedback on this foundational work. They pushed me into my best thinking and ministry creativity. Each of these persons offered incredible insight and encouragement in each’s own way through this writing journey.

Thank you to my professional associates including Bishop Walter Scott Thomas, Sr., DMin, who was an avid supporter throughout my doctoral studies. Thank you for the recommended readings and guidance through the project proposal. I am forever grateful for him allowing me the opportunity to minister this project under his tutelage. Alfred Bailey, Jr., DMin, thank you for your prayers, encouragement, and guidance throughout this entire process. Also, to Ntatu North, DMin, I am thankful for your prayers, listening ear, and time committed to reading the project. I am truly grateful for your support and encouragement. To my contextual associates, Jacquelyn Rantin, DMin, and Sister Angela Smith thank you for investing in me wisdom and love for ministry.

Thank you to my colleagues at United Theological Seminary—Christopher Ware, DMin; Jacques Denkins, DMin; Carmen Knight, DMin; Anthony Hinton, DMin; and to my peer associate, Salome Delang—I cherish our newly found friendship and sisterhood. I am forever grateful our paths have crossed.

With humility and sincere gratitude to all the diaconate, clergy, and lay members who participated in the six-week biblical exploration under my leadership, I am forever grateful for you and the time we shared growing in Christ together.

To Lori D. Spears, DMin, who edited my work with excellence, you are the real G.O.A.T.

My husband Jerryl and my daughters Olivia and Kayla prayed for and supported me throughout this process. I acknowledge the tremendous sacrifices you made in time, attention, dinner, house chores, and so much more for me to complete this process.

## **DEDICATION**

This manuscript is dedicated to my grandparents Julius and Marie Bennett. On his death bed, my grandfather was concerned about getting me off to school to ease the effects of a turbulent family crisis. I am forever grateful for my grandmother, who spent many hours teaching me reading, writing, and math every summer. My parents—Paul and Constance Ray—prayed fervently for me along this journey. I also dedicate this work to my siblings Paula, Reginald, and Corey, who supported me throughout this tremendous growth season. This work is also dedicated to my wonderful husband Jerryl and our children Olivia and Kayla, who bring me great joy and immense love. Finally, I and most importantly I dedicate this work to the one who lives, moves, and is the essence of my very being—my God, Father, and creator who breathed life into me and this ministry project. I am forever grateful for the Spirit that hovered over the deep and formless crevasses bringing order to chaos and light into the dark places in my life. I pray this ministry work blesses all with whom it may come in contact with for your glory here on earth as it is in heaven.



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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
Cor	Corinthians
ESV	English Standard Version
GOAT	Greatest of all time
Lk	Luke
NIV	New International Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
Vv	Verses

## **INTRODUCTION**

This project, “From Alienation to Harmony: A Model for Family Reconciliation,” is the result of my intimate reflection through the writing of my spiritual autobiography of the significant movements of God in my life and a survey of my ministry context. Through my service as a small group facilitator within my ministry context, the pervasiveness of relational disharmony and the need for the ministry to focus on providing support to families to help them move from alienation to harmony within their families were revealed.

This model for family reconciliation is intended to raise awareness of the plight of those who suffer in silence and seek spiritual guidance and resolution. It further serves as a pathway to relational harmony within the congregation as they gain knowledge, skills, and engage in the spiritual discipline of reconciliation.

This chapter synthesizes the academic exploration of the five foundational chapters which sustain the project and support its theme, the ministry of reconciliation serves as a pathway to family harmony. The ministry focus, biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary chapters undergird the working hypothesis that if participants engage in Bible study that focuses on the spiritual discipline of reconciliation, then they will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to increase harmony and decrease alienation with their family members. The project aimed to promote family wholeness by providing social and spiritual support to congregants

desiring reconciliation. Chapter six, project analysis, provide the details which support the hypothesis.

### *Biblical Foundation*

The examination of Luke 15:11-32 undergirds the project and clarifies that human relationships are complicated, but they are not destined for despair. Through the parable, commonly known as the Prodigal Son, Jesus communicates to us that the family of God is inclusive and not exclusive. When the family communes collectively, heaven rejoices. Jesus illuminates the complexities within the narrated family, which exists in everyday families' lives, even today. The complexities disclosed compel our heavenly Father and our God to lead the way towards wholeness and welcome all into the divine family when a turn towards a changed life is made.

The parable illustrates that we all have a place in the family of God. That place is not contingent upon the worldly logic of rituals or observances. Our acceptance by God is not regulated by community regulations or our relational status with one another., there are no place categories within God's family, for we are all equally loved and have the attention and provision of our heavenly Father.

Lastly, the focal pericope brings the reader into the revelation of God and God's active presence and involvement in family reunification through the ministry of reconciliation. The passage demonstrates that family reconciliation after estrangement can be challenging to achieve. All too often, we, like the elder son, the Pharisees, and scribes, remain entrenched in our oppositions rather than open to the possibilities and

blessings that come with embracing the changes the gospel brings.<sup>1</sup> The passage also informs us of the harsh reality that not everyone is happy and ready to celebrate a family member's return. However, steps towards family wholeness are the choice of each family member to engage or not to engage. The grounding truth is that the Father is always ready and willing to be in a relationship with us, and in some instances, that is all some will have. This grounding passage serves as a compass for the project to discover where God actively provides opportunities to move families from estrangement to harmony.

### *Historical Foundation*

President Abraham Lincoln executed the Emancipation on January 1, 1863, and the Civil War, which occurred between the years 1861 and 1865, was a crucial time in American history, mainly African American History. The academic study of this time supports the project by illuminating the origin of the African American family disruptions. Family disruptions for African Americans formed their genesis in the institution of slavery and its trading of enslaved people. Failing to recognize African American persons as people and not commodities or property provided the ideology and avenue for frequent trading to settle debts, punish enslaved people, and gain financial capital however the master deemed fit. An additional barrier to family harmony was the failure to recognize that the mere institution of marriage between enslaved people and their offspring delegitimatized the family unit and legitimized the slave owner's handling of each member as property. The family unit was provided institutional and structural benefits for mainstream Americans that supported them. The enslaved people were not

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas J. W. Milne, "The Father with Two Sons: A Modern Reading of Luke 15," *Themelios* 27, no. 1 (2001): 12.

entitled to, for such entitlements directly opposed the slave master's interest. For instance, the man typically holds the head of household status. However, there could only be one person in charge of Blacks, the slave master. Custody of the children did not belong to the husband or the wife in Black families because the slave owner deemed all of them, men, women, and children, as his property.

Moreover, the right to have property and establish a home where the family could enjoy communion peacefully only held a place in the African American imagination. Enslaved people did not have rights and were not entitled to such things, even family or the fundamental elements supporting their institution. A fearful result of acknowledging African American marriages as a legitimate family unit and their fundamental rights as a family institution would strip away the power and control of slave owners and ultimately jeopardize their economy of a free labor market.

The ending of the Civil War provided a period in history that marked a significant opportunity for transition for African Americans and their family institution. This turning point allowed African Americans the chance to reconcile lost relationships and close gaping wounds caused by family separation and clear the chasm of ambiguous loss. Liberation for African Americans encompasses the security and safety of its family members.

The hope and desire for a reconciled family fueled unprecedented searches for loved ones. This appetite for reconciliation of family bonds supports the project because it reveals a sense of intrinsic motivation to restore what has been lost. Desire fueled by inspiration is the driving force towards desired change in any situation. This project is driven by the motivation and desire of the participants to reestablish broken bonds.

Another revelation that enlightens the project is that historically African American families have not had the institutional, relational, or spiritual support needed to maintain a robust family unit. Slave owners denied the male head of household financial sustenance, custody of children, and property right. After slavery, opportunities were obstructed. Today, unfortunately, external, and internal threats continue to disrupt relational harmony within the family. Family reconciliation, in some instances, continues to be a struggle in the African American community. Struggles continue, whether with abandonment, unforgiveness, unresolved hurts, or the residue of slavery and institutionalized racist systems of bondage that contribute significantly to the unsuccessful reintegration and the sustainability of the Black family. This information is crucial in understanding the complexities of thought, feelings, and emotions that rest in the African American congregant the project is attempting to assist.

### *Theological Foundation*

After careful study of the historical foundation chapter and reflection of the current contextual events in the United States, Black Liberation Theology is crucial to this project. Today, both overt and subtle forms of racism are at work and cause significant disruptions in African Americans' lives. The blatant disregard for human lives and the impact upon the African American families when those lives are stolen have once again been very publicly disregarded during the last year in the United States. As the fight to sustain and protect African American families ensue, the chasm of reconciliation between the dominant culture, and the underclass is further estranged. This estrangement negatively impacts human relations on both the micro and macro level.

The African American psyche and soul have witnessed the blatant intensification of social and political division. Additionally, for nearly two years, families under the weight of the Corona Virus have resided in isolation in their homes. Emotional tensions of complicated grief, unemployment, racial injustice, and voter suppression are beyond our capacity to endure. Our external and internal conflicts are crying out for our ministry of liberation and reconciliation. The African American church's theological framework and work have never met a more critical time to be relevant in the lives of the minjung, and this work encompasses both evangelism and the demand for social responsibility.

The theological theory of reconciliation through the lens of Black Liberation Theology is significant to this doctoral project because it seeks to bring wholeness and resolution to unresolved bitterness toward those who have been offensive towards us, likewise and use towards them. This project aims to support the oppressor and the oppressed as they confront the painful places in their lives, encourages them to initiate the desired change in their areas of brokenness, and unify personal relationships in Christ and the home to live at peace in a hostile world.

### *Interdisciplinary Foundation*

Bowen's Family Systems Theory study provides a coherent framework for the project facilitator and project participants to understand family relations. This interdisciplinary theory clarifies that family problems are not one-dimensional, and issues affect the entire unit as its members react and relate to one another. The study of this discipline also provides a soluble lens through Bowen's eight concepts of the family emotional processes that guide the facilitator in identifying where participants may be



positioned in their family system and where opportunities for the therapeutic goals of restoring trust and fairness and reducing emotional cutoff and family alienation can be applied. Family Systems Theory and this project aim to support participants regardless of the source of the current upset impacting family harmony.

### *Project Analysis*

The project analysis chapter surmises the project's methodology, implementation, and summary of learnings gained from the discharge of the project. The methodology section describes the qualitative research design and its data collection methods, participant selection, ethical considerations, and the intervention modality. The implementation section provides a detailed weekly description of the biblical study and the participant analysis. The summary of learnings section illuminates lessons gleaned from the study by the participants and me. Finally, concluding reflections discusses opportunities for future enhancements and future asportations.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **MINISTRY FOCUS**

#### **Introduction**

Through the ministry of reconciliation, this doctoral project seeks to open the prison door for both the guard and the prisoner. It seeks to strengthen family connections and the spiritual voice within the Christian community in order to provide relevant ministry presence in this relatively strained world. The goal of family reconciliation is to build the capacity to trust the God that dwells within the humanity of humankind in order to reconcile differences and establish healthy family relationships.

The project aims to explore the ministry of reconciliation as a pathway toward family harmony. After participants finish participating in the project, some anticipated outcomes are to gain an increased knowledge and skills of the spiritual discipline of reconciliation, with some understanding of or even plan for applying it to their family situations. Participants will gain skills to help strengthen the family unit and introduce the tenants of healthy relationships, strategies regarding conflict resolution, coping techniques for managing change and transition, and provide social and emotional support through the reconciliation process.

The execution of this project will collectively draw from vast personal experiences, professionally and vocationally. Personally, I lived through the turbulence of family reunification when my parents reconciled their marital differences. Our family

was able to gain spiritual and emotional support through our connection with the various ministries of the church. Professionally, I am skilled in project design, development, and facilitation and have worked successfully in senior leadership in community corrections over the past twenty-seven years. Vocationally, this project will also draw upon my sixteen years of ministry experience. All these skills and experiences will be utilized throughout this project cycle.

The effects of family disharmony are most often never spoken of or recognized within the African American community. The necessity for African Americans to reconcile with family members occur for many reasons such as the justice involved returning from a period of incarceration, assisting family members trying to get on their feet after a financial shortfall, or the attempts to rekindle intimate partner relationships, or managing the loss of loved ones. The pain of contentious interactions often results in the continued breakdown of harmony within the nuclear family.

Historically, the African American family has struggled to exist harmoniously as a family throughout its American history. Enslaved people experienced continual separation and were denied structures to exist as a family unit. Due to the continuous division of the family as a result of the sale and resale of enslaved people, the family, according to Robinson, “was always an insecure unit.”

<sup>1</sup> In many instances, today, the African American family continues to live under this constant threat of instability.

In addition to the constant threats which seek to separate the family, the world is bombarded with relational strife. This strife fills our lives with negative sound bites

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. Robinson, “The Right of Child Victims of Armed Conflict to Reintegration and Recovery,” *Potechefstroomse Elketronises Regsbald* 15, no. 1 (2012): 46-101.

across our radio airways, television screens, and social media platforms. It is as if strife and contention is the norm of interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately, relational strife takes on many forms, and it is evident in our politics, governance of resources and even how we view and treat one another as neighbor. There is little tolerance, if any, for differences of opinion, agree to disagree, and even less tolerance to work through difficult relationships in hopes of a better outcome. Relationships are quickly dissolvable, and the social norm is to be dismissive of relationships and opportunities for reconciliation. The spirit of contention, unfortunately, does not dissipate at the doorpost of our private lives, rather it runs just as ramped throughout the walls of our very homes as it does in the public arena. The difference is contention within the family home can be more traumatic and result in consequences which impact the entire family circle.

Many families suffer daily in silence with feelings of anxiety, anger, helplessness, and fear and are left to feel as though they have no place to turn for assistance. Sadly enough, many have resolved that contentious family relations are normal and acceptable. In a world filled with such divisiveness on so many of our social fronts, families must learn how to develop wholesome relationships and discover how the ministry of Christ is the ultimate example of the power of reconciliation, and this power can restore family wholeness. In the words of Reverend Keith Anderson, “we need the ministry of reconciliation now more than ever.”<sup>2</sup>

Today, it seems as if the only time the nation is able or willing to pull together in unity and get on one accord is through tragedy, and sadly, even that does not last long. A major stumbling block to reconciliation is trust. Once the bond of trust is broken, it can

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<sup>2</sup> Keith Anderson, “Why We Need the Ministry of Reconciliation Now More Than Ever,” *Sojourners*, [https://sojo.net/articles/why-we-need-ministry-reconciliation-now-more-ever\\_](https://sojo.net/articles/why-we-need-ministry-reconciliation-now-more-ever_)

be very difficult for it to thrive between two people again. The lingering question is, when is it the right time to allow the reestablishment of these connections, and what is the best way and most holistic approach for everyone involved? Simply forcing reunification by allowing someone to live inside the home without proper support to re-establish a positive reconciled experience is likely to affect everyone involved negatively. All too often, however, this is the only approach because it is the only known option. Predominantly African American families are not well-versed in trauma, its signs, or its causes. Sadly, strife can be normative for many African American families, for no other alternative is known. Supportive means of being a harmonious family unit have not always been shared within this community broadly.

Anderson raises the question, “can we ever trust the power of forgiveness, or will the flawed humanity of man always be perceived as a potential threat?”<sup>3</sup> Threats by human nature are eliminated, should the family unit be eliminated or can the threat with spiritual support and direction become a strength and building block towards family wholeness?

Anderson further paints the picture of this dilemma as he draws upon the words of Brother Curtis Almquist, he suggests that society, like the elder son in the story of the parodical son suffered from “presumptuous sin.” Almquist conveys,

There is [a] kind of presumptuous sin [that] assume[s] a kind of perpetual ‘stuckness’ about another person. Let’s say you know something about this person’s past - something they did or said, or how they ‘typically’ acted a day ago or a week ago or a year ago or twenty years ago - and you assume that this person cannot change and will not change, in part because you could not countenance it. You wouldn’t allow them to change if they wanted to. You freeze them. We have enormous power to condemn and imprison others by keeping them in the prison of their own past. Guarding that prison door. Keeping them locked up. Or

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson, “Why We Need the Ministry of Reconciliation Now More Than Ever,” [https://sojo.net/articles/why-we-need-ministry-reconciliation-now-more-ever\\_](https://sojo.net/articles/why-we-need-ministry-reconciliation-now-more-ever_)

forbidding someone to change is like locking them in a prison. The real tragedy is that both your prisoner and you, the prison guard, are in prison. Both of you are locked up.<sup>4</sup>

### **Context**

The New Psalmist Baptist Church is a ministry that is 121 years old. It is rich in history and has community and global influence across the nation and world. A major theme throughout its existence is its ability to build strong connections within the community in which it serves. Its ministry has served as a beacon of light in the Baltimore, Maryland community through World Wars I and II, Jim Crow, Brown versus Ferguson, Affirmative Action, and even the global Coronavirus Pandemic.

Under the leadership of Bishop Walter Scott Thomas, Sr., The New Psalmist Baptist Church provides over eighty active ministries to support adult men and women, youth and young adults, and children. In addition to its many ministries the entire campus which encompasses the main sanctuary, and the connection center is known as the New Psalmist Retreat and Meeting Center (NPMRC). According to the NPMRC website, the center can be rented by community members and outside vendors to support various activities within the community.<sup>5</sup> It is desired to provide the church campus as a hub for building connections for ministry and fellowship activities to the community and its neighboring businesses. The church currently resides within the Seton Business Park and began its ministry at that location in October 2010. The church is seeking to identify

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<sup>4</sup> Anderson, "Why We Need the Ministry of Reconciliation Now More Than Ever," [https://sojo.net/articles/why-we-need-ministry-reconciliation-now-more-ever\\_](https://sojo.net/articles/why-we-need-ministry-reconciliation-now-more-ever_)

<sup>5</sup> New Psalmist Baptist Church, "New Psalmist Retreat and Meeting Center," NPRMC, <http://www.nprmc.org>.

needs of the community and provide innovative ways to connect more with the community. The doctoral project is believed to be an avenue to establish a new opportunity for that desired engagement.

The church campus is surrounded by the 21215 neighborhoods. The 21215 province is the largest area in Baltimore City. It is predominately an African American Community.<sup>6</sup> There are many factors that threaten family wholeness within the community. According to the home facts reported in 2010, 52.67% of the population did not regularly attend any religious services.<sup>7</sup> Families within the community are small only 26% of husband and wife teams exist, 33% of families are single guardian, and 34% are single.<sup>8</sup> Most of the citizens within the community are blue-collar and white-collar workers and of which women make up most of the population.<sup>9</sup> The median income is \$34,471 with only 31% of the population holding fulltime employment, while 22% earn part-time wages, and 47% of the population earn no wages at all.<sup>10</sup>

According to the home facts report, the community is also plagued by failing schools, as the twelve schools in the community have a D+ ranking.<sup>11</sup> Violent crime is ramped throughout the community. Violent crimes are defined as crimes of murder, non-

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<sup>6</sup> City of Baltimore, "Zip Code 21215," City Data, <http://www.city-data.com/baltimore-county/m/marian-drive-1.html>.

<sup>7</sup> United States Zip Codes, "Zip Code 21215," United States Zip Codes, <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/21215/>.

<sup>8</sup> United States Zip Codes, "Zip Code 21215," <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/21215/>.

<sup>9</sup> City of Baltimore, "21215 Zip Code," <http://www.city-data.com/baltimore-county/m/marian-drive-1.html>.

<sup>10</sup> United States Zip Codes, "Zip Code 21215," <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/21215/>.

<sup>11</sup> City of Baltimore, "Baltimore 21215," Home Facts, <https://www.homefacts.com/zip-code/Maryland/Baltimore-City-County/Baltimore/21215.html>.

negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. According to the crime facts report, 87.5% of the neighborhood is prey to violent crime and 83.1% falls prey to property crime. The overall crime rate is 60.42%, which is higher than the national average.<sup>12</sup> The Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services reports that there are over 9,222 releases throughout the state of Maryland in 2018, of which 42.36% (2,184) of its releases from prison return to Baltimore City after a period of incarceration for eighteen months or more.<sup>13</sup> This data is not reflective of federal and local jail releases. It is anticipated that the inclusion of those releases significantly will impact the rate of reunifications within this area. In addition to the routine rate of releases, due to the COVID-19 Pandemic an additional 2,000 inmates have been released from prison up to four months early. The expected, as well as the unexpected, return of a family member can cause strain on an already strained family unit and result in serious traumatic experiences within the family.

The summary of findings within the community that threaten serve as potential threats to the family unit are as follows:

- Half of the community 52.7% do not attend any regular church service. There is an opportunity to address the spiritual needs of the community.<sup>14</sup>
- Only 26% of husband-and-wife family exists, and 33% of the families in the community are made up of single guardian relationships.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> City of Baltimore, “Baltimore, MD 21215,” <https://www.homefacts.com/zip-code/Maryland/Baltimore-City-County/Baltimore/21215.html>,

<sup>13</sup> City of Baltimore, “Baltimore, MD 21215,” <https://www.homefacts.com/zip-code/Maryland/Baltimore-City-County/Baltimore/21215.html>

<sup>14</sup> United States Zip Codes, “Zip Code 21215,” <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/21215/>,

<sup>15</sup> United States Zip Codes, “Zip Code 21215,” <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/21215/>,



- The community is struggling financially as \$34,471 make up the medium income.<sup>16</sup>
- Nearly half (47%) of the population earn no income at all.<sup>17</sup>
- The schools within the community are failing schools (D+ rating).<sup>18</sup>
- Violent crime is one of the highest (87.5%) within Baltimore City
- 42.36% of state prison release returned to this community after servicing a period of incarceration of eighteen months or more. An additional 2,000 were released early due to COVID-19.<sup>19</sup>
- New Psalmist Baptist Church offers over eighty active ministries that could help to support and strengthen the families within the community in every need identified above.<sup>20</sup>

There is a tremendous need within the context to provide pathways to connect the community to the services that would help spiritually support and sustain the family unit. In addition to ministering to and addressing the needs within the congregation this project seeks to further associate the neighboring community into connection with the programmatic supports offered by New Psalmist Baptist Church.

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<sup>16</sup> United States Zip Codes, “Zip Code 21215,” <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/21215/>

<sup>17</sup> United States Zip Codes, “Zip Code 21215,” <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/21215/>

<sup>18</sup> City of Baltimore, “Baltimore, MD 21215,” <https://www.homefacts.com/zip-code/Maryland/Baltimore-City-County/Baltimore/21215.html>

<sup>19</sup> City of Baltimore, “Baltimore, MD 21215,” <https://www.homefacts.com/zip-code/Maryland/Baltimore-City-County/Baltimore/21215.html>

<sup>20</sup> New Psalmist Baptist Church, “Home,” New Psalmist Baptist Church, <http://www.newpsalmist.org>.

New Psalmist Baptist Church is positioned uniquely within the community to provide the much-needed spiritual and supportive services for the families within the community. Physically, New Psalmist Baptist Church is located within the business park with some supportive business neighbors. For example, the Division of Parole and Probation sits just north of the church campus. Ministering to the justice involved could provide an opportunity to create a future partnership between the church and the local probation agency to alleviate criminal activity in the area and direct the population to life-sustaining support services. It potentially will serve as a feeder to the restorative circle, which can be a second chance relationship program once the initial project is completed and is ready for further expansion. One of the New Psalmist Baptist Church ministries is Project 200, which is a job readiness and placement program for anyone seeking employment. This also could serve to support reentrants and their families, along with the health screening services and neighboring partnerships for entitlement services. New Psalmist Baptist Church also adopts area schools and works closely with its administration to provide them with much-needed resources.

The New Psalmist Baptist Church is unique in that much of its membership resides outside of the 21215 area as members commute in from the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia (DMV), and the Pennsylvania area. Therefore, not all the members are aware of the needs of the community or how to connect with the community. Most recently, the church has enhanced its vision to making connections to God, to the community, and to the world. It is believed that this project will serve to reconcile church and community relationships and it will serve as a pathway to spiritual liberation and freedom. Each member has been charged with intentionally leading as many persons as

possible into a dynamic, engaging, and loving relationship with Jesus Christ. I believe this project serves as a pathway to accomplish that charge.

The membership is extremely generous in its giving and in its response through missions toward needed projects such as adopting schools, enhancing the local police precinct through its building project, and similar initiatives. Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the awareness that the 21215 neighborhoods, where the church resides, are in drastic need of support from the church. The highest number of infected persons and deaths due to the virus live within this neighborhood. This crisis has shined a brighter light on the disparities of resources as people within are suffering from food shortages, access to routine medical care, and unemployment. While the church has done a herculin job of distributing food during this crisis, additional focus and efforts are needed to assist families in sustaining relational harmony. Ministering to families is another opportunity to respond with the love of Christ to a very serious need within the community. Ministering to families is another opportunity to connect the community to the church, to God, and to each other.

Reportedly, there has been a declined interest in the church not just from this community but nationally as well.<sup>21</sup> According to Gutenson, “the decline of the church universal reflects the decline in our connections to one another in the world.”<sup>22</sup> It is believed that ministering to the unspoken areas where people are seeking liberation will restore community connections between the community and the church. This requires

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<sup>21</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey et al., “Cellphone Data Shows Coronavirus Kept Churchgoers at Home in Every State on Easter,” *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/04/17/cekl-phone-data-coronavirus-churchgoers-home-easter/?arc404=true>.

<sup>22</sup> Charles E. Gutenson, *Church Worth Getting Up For* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 9, Kindle.

dynamic engagement and a revamping and ousting of obsolete models of ministry.

Dynamic engagement in the twenty-first century church will require new approaches and new understanding of the needs of the community. As a result of establishing these connections in community, it is believed that the connections will intentionally lead others into a dynamic, engaging, and loving relationship with Jesus Christ, thus furthering the mission of the church as Christ instructed.

There is a tremendous amount of work needed in order to minister in this way, Gutenson believes that “many love Jesus and their perception of his life values, but they look at us Christians and our churches and they see a huge disconnect.”<sup>23</sup> He goes further to state that, “Jesus is widely defined by this interaction and relationships, the things he did and the ways in which he related to others.”<sup>24</sup> In order to relate to this population, the church community will have to recognize and accept the differences in culture. The culture of the community is quite different from that of the existing church culture. Largely, the community population does not have a knowledge of church etiquette and protocols. Current members in the church context value traditional church etiquette. However, to meet the needs of the community and provide a relevant spiritual connection in the community, members will have to be willing to increase its capacity for inclusivity, embrace differences, and implement impactful ways of churching that appeal innovative rather than obsolete. There is no magical time frame in which this will occur, no magic flip of the switch rather, this will be a unique dance of spiritual growth and development for all involved.

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<sup>23</sup> Gutenson, *Church Worth Getting Up For*, 9, Kindle.

<sup>24</sup> Gutenson, *Church Worth Getting Up For*, 10, Kindle.

This project seeks to minister to families within the church and surrounding community and ultimately bring people into greater connection relationally in their families and the church family. The project seeks to expose participants to Jesus Christ and introduce them to all the ministry services within the church. Jesus serves as our greatest example demonstrating for us how this is to be done. Throughout his ministry, he came to people directly right where they needed liberation and restoration. The church must minister to the places where people are hurting. The church must think creatively about what the needs of the community are even if the community does not openly express the need to the church. Offering a six-week small group study on family reconciliation is an opportunity to engage in meaningful connections within the community. It will provide support in an area of limited resources and convey to the community the ministry of Jesus Christ is relevant and active in their particular area of need.

### **Ministry Journey**

God has afforded me a unique spiritual journey which serves to further enhance this doctoral work of study. Personally, my family and I have been impacted by alienation, disharmony, and negative reunification. The effects of this disharmony permeate throughout the family circle to this day. Throughout our experience, it was the ministry of the church that provided the stability and support needed in order to get through the difficult times. Through the development of those spiritual connections, I can serve others in their broken places for them to become stronger and better in Christ and within the community.

I currently serve as an associate minister; and I am licensed under the spiritual leadership of Bishop Walter Scott Thomas, Sr., pastor, of The New Psalmist Baptist Church. I have served in this capacity since November 2004. I am devoted to community-based ministry efforts and have performed foreign mission and community outreach in Nairobi and Nakuru, Kenya, and the Baltimore community as an associate chaplain at Bon Secours Hospital. My ministry service also includes devotion and dedication to my church family and the church ministries, which have included ministering in the Prison Ministry, New Members Ministry, Financial Empowerment Ministry, as the Vision Team Leader for the Missions and Outreach Ministry, and Kingdom Treasures Bookstore Ministry Lead. I serve with the Women's Ministry in the facilitation of connection groups, and as the ministry planning team. I currently serve as a board member of the Transforming Lives Community Development Corporation and the ministry lead for the Barnabas grief support ministry.

I earned my Associates Degree in Criminal Justice in 1992 from Howard Community College, my Bachelor of Arts in Sociology in 1995, from Mercer University, and there I joined the sisterhood of Delta Sigma Theta. My Master of Arts degree is in Spiritual and Pastoral Care. I obtained this degree in 2007 from Loyola University. I completed a Master of Divinity equivalency through the pre-doctoral program in 2019 at United Theological Seminary; and today I am journeying towards my Doctoral of Ministry Degree.

I have been fortunate enough to work in my desired field of community corrections for over twenty-seven years, working with the justice has given me great joy. I am not sure why I am so compelled to work with this particular disenfranchised

population, but I am at peace doing so. My sphere of influence today is mainly at the senior leadership level; however, I continue to positively impact the population through policy, program development, community partnerships, staff training, and the like. A good portion of my career was spent in direct contact with the justice trying to build intrinsic motivation to impact change in their debilitating beliefs and destructive behaviors which fuel the revolving doors of the criminal justice system.

Today, I am still drawn to connecting with hurting people; and I desire to bring them, if just for a moment, a steady hand to hold, and some sense of peace and hope through an encouraging word. I seek to give the same unique support that has been shown to me all my life by others.

I sense that God is moving me in another direction both professionally and vocationally, although the path is unclear. I can feel a shift in my spirit. This doctoral body of work will serve as the framework of the new pathways God has for me. Until it is revealed, I will diligently give my attention to the doctoral work at hand, believing that its work is all a part of God's revelatory plan. Spiritually, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God has his hand on me. I know that nothing can separate me from his love and nothing in my past or present will abort his purpose for my life. I am confident in the gifts and abilities God has given me. It is through those gifts and abilities I am confidently able to minister and carry out this dynamic project.

I desire today to help others discover the God that is within them and their relationships through the ministry of reconciliation. My favorite scripture and the one I hope to fuel this project is Luke 15:20b NIV, "...but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him..." Like this story of the prodigal

son, there are so many areas in our lives where the permissive will of God has allowed us to wonder into some undesirable places, but even in those places the eye of the Lord is upon our lives and the hand of the Lord is still ordering our steps. It is through the examination of the prodigal son that the ministry of reconciliation fuels the discussion for family harmony. It is here that we study to discover the tenants of family reconciliation for our lives and within the restorative circles.

The growing edge of my ministry is a soldier for Christ who is no longer ashamed of my past hurts. I am urgently awaiting the opportunity to help others become free of bondage and live in the freedom of Christ.

### **The Synergy**

The theme intended for exploration through this doctoral project is the ministry of reconciliation that serves as a pathway to family harmony. The ability to restore relationships to a former state of peace within the family unit is the desired outcome of the project. The Apostle Paul conveyed quite clearly the responsibility as followers of Christ in this matter as stated in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”<sup>25</sup> Although the world around us is divisive and dismissive of relationships, we have a responsibility to chart pathways of restoration and hope for those seeking it.

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<sup>25</sup> Harold W. Attridge, *HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2006), location 120314, Kindle.



My ministerial skills and interest will serve the needs of this context through this doctoral Project by the facilitation of small groups called restorative circles. The purpose of the restorative circles is to assist adult men and women to establish healthy family relationships and restore family harmony after a period of estrangement.

Throughout my ministerial experience, I have facilitated several small groups with both men and women, separately and jointly, on various spiritual based topics. I have experience, through the financial empowerment ministry, in facilitating small groups, ministering to couples, and many groups in establishing financial wholeness within the household. I believe the same skills can be utilized in the restorative circles. I also have experience working with both men and women around making positive choices and redirecting cognitive distortions that hinder the change process. I am well versed in building intrinsic motivation to coach persons through the stages of the change process.

The general nature and content of the proposed project is to minister to families seeking reconciliation and healthy relationships within the family circle. I seek to provide a place to voice, to grow, and learn how to be the family that pleases God. The project is provided online. It is believed that online connection provides some amenity to the group, no one will walk past the classroom in the church building and know this group is for people with family problems. The online platform also is in response to the social distancing requirements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also serves as an alternative platform to reach those who would not otherwise feel comfortable to attend church or its on-campus activities. Upon the conclusion of the project, it is hoped that in addition to gaining skills in the spiritual discipline of reconciliation, the participants will

have established connections with the church and feel comfortable exploring ministry offerings in other capacities, participate in worship services, and join the body of Christ.

The general audience for this project is adult families both male and female seeking to become stronger relationally. There is no specific family make up required, simply family members experiencing estrangement within the family who desire to work towards positive change within the unit. The family make up could be man and wife, parent and child, or sibling-to-sibling relationships, alternative families are welcomed as well.

I seek to learn through this doctoral project additional needs within the community in which The New Psalmist Baptist Church ministry can further support in family harmony. I want to learn qualitatively the effectiveness of ministering to families who are struggling to re-establish reconciliation within the family. I seek to learn if participation in the project will increase the knowledge of spiritual reconciliation and if that knowledge will be used within the participants' own family circles. Lastly, I seek to discover how God will continue to unveil his purpose for this project and his community through this ministry effort.

### **Conclusion**

The general nature and content of the project is to design and implement a small group study known as restorative circles that will facilitate in the restoration of family harmony. This project will minister to families seeking reconciliation and healthy relationships within the family circle.

The theme of the project is family wholeness through the ministry of reconciliation. This project seeks to work through the barriers to successful reunification and help to create positive building blocks for wholesome family relationships. The working hypothesis of this project is, if participants engage in a Bible study that focuses on the spiritual discipline of reconciliation, then they will possess the knowledge and the skills necessary to increase harmony and decrease alienation with their family members.

The general plan for the implementation of the doctoral project is to provide online restorative circle small group sessions to both men and women who have a desire to gain skills to rebuild and establish family harmony within the family unit. The restorative circle group will be advertised online during the connection group registration period at the church. The description of the restorative circle group offering will be written in such a way that it will target families seeking supportive services in restoring relationships. Interested participants will register online on The New Psalmist Baptist Church website.

The restorative circle group will meet for six weeks, the classes are offered either in the spring or fall and usually follow the college academic schedule. The group will work through the spiritual teaching of Luke chapter fifteen verses eleven through thirty-two. The goal is to help participants gain the skill needed to support and build healthy relationships, to introduce participants to Jesus Christ, and the supportive services of the church. Additionally, the restorative circles will serve as an online network of support for families who feel isolated and alone in this matter. The church ministry will serve as an agent of reconciliation for the participants, and finally the ministry of reconciliation will serve as a pathway to spiritual connection for families.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

The biblical foundations chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the Lukan gospel narrative found in the fifteenth chapter, verses eleven through thirty-two. This chapter seeks to support the theme; the ministry of reconciliation serves as a pathway to family wholeness. Through a thorough examination of the focal text, the hypothesis, if participants engage in a Bible study that focuses on the spiritual discipline of reconciliation, then they will possess the knowledge and the skills necessary to increase harmony and decrease alienation with their family members is supported and serves as the biblical foundation for this doctoral project. This chapter will explore and examine the historical and social implications of the dialogue between Jesus, the Pharisees, and scribes within the focal text. Understanding the historical context will support understanding the project theme and build understanding regarding God's desire to reconcile the lost and rejoicing over the restoration of what is found.

The chapter will then move into the literary context, which will explore the relationship between the preceding, focal, and exceeding pericope in its relation to the theme of reconciliation. Within the literary context, Jesus exudes the continued response of joy and praise towards the object and persons that were once lost and is now found.

The form, structure, and movement section of the chapter will discuss the close examination of the biblical translations and the interpretations of the commentary authors, biblical dictionaries, word study, scholarly articles, and journals both in support and against the project theme. There are several subdivisions which include: The Great Disappointment verses eleven through twelve, Consequences of Detachment verses thirteen through sixteen, The Turning Point verses seventeen through twenty (a), Reconciliation: A Pathway to Wholeness verses twenty (b) through twenty-four, and Reconciliation and Managing the Entitled verses twenty-five through thirty-two.

The detailed analysis will convey evidence supporting or counterevidence against each verse's position statement using the focal text verse analysis. Additional unanticipated evidence in support of the understanding of the text is also discussed in this section. The theological interpretation section will illuminate the verse or verses representing the theological center of the passage, directly supporting the focal text theme. Here, Jesus conveys the crescendo of his message to his critics. The theological key is to serve as the hermeneutical transfer driver and the essential support for communal life with God and man.

An examination of the hermeneutical transfer will convey why this research matters in the life of Jesus' ministry and the relevance in the believer's life today. It will illuminate the parables key takeaway or lesson for practical application and underscore the biblical foundation of the doctoral project.

Lastly, the synthesis and conclusion will summarize the critical revelations obtained through the detailed study of the focal text and how it provides the foundation to

and undergirds the doctoral project. The text's complicated truths recapitulated here are the key elements that outline the pathway to strengthen families through reconciliation.

### *Historical and Social Context*

The Gospel of Luke is a New Testament book written by Luke, a physician, and the close companion of the Apostle Paul. Luke is a gentile physician who directs his writing to Theophilus and gentile believers. In his gospel, he records a detailed account of Jesus being fully human and fully divine. Luke illuminates, throughout his historical account, the compassion of Jesus and his readiness for relationships with both Jew and Gentile.

Thematically, Luke organizes this historical narrative recounting, 1). "The birth and preparation of Jesus, (Lk. 1:1-4:13), 2). The message and ministry of Jesus, (Lk. 4:14-21:38), and 3). The death and resurrection of Jesus, (Lk. 22:1-24:53)."<sup>1</sup> Geographically, Luke records the journey of Jesus from his ministry in Galilee to his journey toward Jerusalem and his triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Lk. 5:29-32).

Luke records a total of twenty-eight parables of Jesus in his gospel. Thematically, the parables demonstrate the father's love toward those viewed as lowly in social, religious, and political status. Throughout Jesus' ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem, he demonstrates the love of God, the Father, towards all people. The narrative depicts Jesus' readiness to commune with the downtrodden through his meal fellowship with the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus' love and care of the outcasts and the lost is further demonstrated in the focal pericope through his initiation of reconciliation. This parable is

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical citations are from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

only recorded by Luke and is commonly known as the Prodigal Son or the Lost Son. Some contemporary scholars have suggested the title, “The Father and his two sons.” Matthew does mention the first parable of this trilogy in his telling of the wandering or lost sheep in Matthew 18:12-14. However, the dialogue reported by Matthew is directed towards the disciples rather than the Pharisees. It is focused on not looking down on others regardless of whether they are children or anyone who belongs to the kingdom of lowly status. In Matthew’s gospel, he also narrates God’s commitment to finding and rejoicing over one that is lost.

The preceding events leading up to the focal narrative occur after Jesus heals a paralyzed man. Jesus then invites Levi, the tax collector, to follow him. Levi agrees. Later that day, the newly convert hosts a great banquet for Jesus at his home. Many tax collectors were eating with Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes complained about Jesus eating and socializing with tax collectors and sinners (Lk. 5:27-31). The indictment of Jesus’ conduct discussed by the Pharisees and the scribes initiates a relentless series of teaching and parables by Jesus for the remainder of his journey towards Jerusalem.

In Luke 15:11-32, Jesus speaks in response to the criticism against him. The parable is the last in a sequence of three parables (the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son). Jesus used these stories as figurative narratives to convey to the Pharisees, scribes, and disciples, God’s acceptance, and grace toward those seemingly underserving and lost. Jesus directs his teachings towards the Pharisees and scribes, who criticize Jesus for his hospitality and shared meal with whom they considered sinners (Lk. 5:29-32).

The rebuke and criticism of Jesus from the Pharisees and scribes is significant to this historical context given the political, social, and religious influence both the

Pharisees and scribes held in the community. Given their influence level, it is imperative to pause here to reflect a moment upon their given roles.

The Pharisees (Greek - *Pharisaíoi*)<sup>2</sup> Φαρισαῖος (farisaios) ‘Pharisee’ (G5330) meaning “separate ones” or separatist, and they were a Jewish sect who held powerful political, social, and religious influence.<sup>3</sup> As separatist, they fellowshiped with only those who strictly upheld the Mosaic law. In addition to their observance of the written law, they strictly upheld oral traditions, observations, and ceremonies.

The scribes (Hebrew- *sôpēr*)<sup>4</sup> (Greek- γραμματεὺς (grammateus) ‘scribe’ (G1122) were revered as a teacher or expert in the law. They were known to be scholars of the law, as scribes they served official capacities such as the city clerk, the keeper of governmental and official documents, and therefore had political influence.<sup>5</sup> This sect of Jews are not priest but held the esteemed prominence of expert interpreters and teachers of the law in this capacity, and they held significant influence over the people. Within the text, they held great contempt of Jesus, who came teaching and influencing the believers away from their teaching and ultimate social authority.

Both the Pharisees and scribes prided themselves as upright religious leaders by their strict adherence to the law. The Pharisees believed that their strict upkeeping of the law would be rewarded as God promised them in Deuteronomy 28:1-2. They vehemently

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<sup>2</sup> Tyndale House, “Luke 14,” Step Bible,  
[https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.14&options=N VHUG\\_](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.14&options=N VHUG_)

<sup>3</sup> Tyndale House, “Luke 14,”  
[https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.14&options=N VHUG\\_](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.14&options=N VHUG_)

<sup>4</sup> Anthony J. Saldarini, “Scribes,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Tyndale House, “Luke 14,”  
[https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.14&options=N VHUG\\_](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.14&options=N VHUG_)



contended that they were owed this place of honor in God's kingdom as a result of their righteousness. Conversely, the Pharisees viewed the tax collectors and sinners as outcast, and they believed:

By their lifestyle they had chosen to deliberately opt-out of membership of the covenantal people of Israel and were considered outsiders alienated from the blessings God bestowed upon Israel. The Pharisees believed that Jesus' association with the outsiders provided the inclusion of them within the Kingdom of God which, "belittled the holiness of God"<sup>6</sup> and the Mosaic Covenant, also known as the law.<sup>7</sup>

These estranged brothers were deemed unworthy of the blessings of the father; and therefore, were despised within the Jewish community.

### *Literary Context*

In the focal pericope (Lk. 15, 11-32), the theme of reconciliation and restoration is lifted by Luke through his threefold parables of the lost sheep (Lk. 15:1-7), the lost coin (Lk. 15:8-10), and the lost son (Lk. 15:11-32). In the focal pericope, God, through the character of an earthly father, teaches, not only is it the father's responsibility to participate in reconciliation, but it is also his responsibility to initiate and seek after the desired one to be restored. Jesus also demonstrates his immediate willingness and joy in rebuilding and restoring the relationship between him and the younger son upon his decision to return home.

The preceding periscope, Luke 15:1-7 and 15:8-10, conveys the theme of God's joyous care for his flock. It also supports the theme of reconciliation, restoration, and joy.

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Franklin, *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 947.

<sup>7</sup> Harold W. Attridge, "Deuteronomy 28:1-2," in *HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2006), location 182221, Kindle.

Luke 15:11-32 demonstrates to us Jesus' involvement with the care of those viewed and treated as the weaker member of the community. In this pericope, Jesus teaches the Pharisees, scribes, and disciples the priority of God's kingdom is reversed; rejoicing rather than condemning the loss is his aim. No one in the family of God is greater than any other. Living and maintaining a righteous community requires effort on everyone's part. God's kingdom is an inclusionary rather than exclusionary community. It rejoices when the lost are found and the family is restored.

Likewise, the theme of reconciliation and restoration is also lifted in the ensuing pericope (Lk. 16:1-13 The Shrewd Manager) and is, therefore, relevant and a continual discourse to the focal pericope. Although Jesus' discourse shifts to his disciples, Jesus continues to demonstrate to them as the Pharisees and scribes are listening, the forgiveness of those who were unable to keep up with the law and pay their debts. Through the shrewd manager's changed life in collecting the debt without fees for himself, he demonstrates the act of God, a righteous man, and steward of the community. Jesus again acknowledges and renders praise for a changed life.

### *Form, Structure, and Movement*

In order to compare the translations of the passage (Lk. 15:11-32), the following biblical interpretations were consulted: *The New International Version* (NIV), *The New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), *The New Living Translation* (NLT), and the *English Standard Version* (ESV). Their subdivisions within the pericope are as follows: NIV: The parable of the Lost Son vv. 11-12, 13-16, 17-20a, 20b, 21, 22-24, 25-27, 28-32. NRSV: The Parable of the Prodigal and his Brother vv. 11-24, 25-32. NLT: Parable of the Lost

Son vv. 11-12, 13-16, 17-19, 20-21, 22-24, 25-27, 28-32. ESV: The Parable of the Prodigal Son vv. 11-16, 17-24, 25-32.

There is no disagreement between the subdivisions or subtitles of the above biblical translations. To further engage in exegesis, several resources were consulted, including biblical dictionaries, the literature on biblical customs and norms, academic journals, articles, and scholarly commentaries.

There is also no disagreement between the subdivisions authored, however, the following subdivisions are offered.

- I. The Great Disappointment (vv. 11-12)
- II. Consequences of Detachment (vv. 13-16)
- III. The Turning Point (vv. 17-20a)
- IV. Reconciliation a Pathway to Wholeness (vv. 20b-24)
- V. Reconciliation and Managing the Entitled (vv. 25-32)

### **Detailed Analysis**

#### *The Great Disappointment – Verses 11-12*

In this passage, Jesus opens with an inclusionary statement, “a man had two sons” (Lk. 15:11). From the beginning, he communicates the inclusion of each individual, each member is recognized and has a place within the family. The mood of the narrative is then shifted by the demands of the younger son to receive his rightful portion of the father’s estate. His demand is obscure given the fact that the owner of the estate, his father, is still alive. Customarily, the son would receive his portion at the point of the

father's death or at the decision of the father to gift the estate to the sons while he remained alive.<sup>8</sup> Although unusual, Abraham in Genesis 25:5-6 sets a good precedence for breaking the tradition in leaving all he had to Isaac and gifting his estate to the sons of his concubines while he was still alive. The initiation to disperse the estate, in any event, is customarily a decision that rests upon the father rather than the giver and not the son or recipient. The son's initiation of the request is customarily disrespectful not only towards his father but the entire family. This discourse supports the theme of reconciliation as a pathway to family wholeness because it depicts the catalyst, which ultimately riffs and separates the family.

Noland and Blight agree that "here that the use of the word "estate," the EVS denotes property, its Greek transliteration is - οὐσία (ousia) (G3776) meaning 'life' or 'means of subsistence' and the estate was what supported the life of the family."<sup>9</sup> Dividing or pulling apart of the property allegorically represents the breaking of at least one of the essential foundational supports of the family. The pulling apart of the estate also affects everyone in the family, the father, younger and elder sons. The father is left with less of his estate to function with. Plummer contends that if the father gifted the sons before his demise, both sons would have been responsible for caring for the father with their portion of the estate until his death.<sup>10</sup> The younger son failed to fulfill his dutiful

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<sup>8</sup> James M. Freeman and Harold J. Chadwick, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998), 509.

<sup>9</sup> Richard C. Blight, *An Exegetical Summary of Luke 12–24*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 143.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke: International Critical Commentary* (London, UK: T and T Clark International, 1896), 372.

obligation to sustain the father until his demise and served himself with the wealth he obtained.

Utey believes the actions of the younger son implied his desire for the father's death. A contrasting interpretation suggests the younger son was driven by his youthful ignorance and desired to obtain the sustenance of the family without the responsibility of cultivating and stewarding family life. This does not mean he wanted any family members, including the father dead.

#### *Consequences of Detachment – Verses 13-16*

In verse thirteen, Jesus says, “the son gathered what he had and set off for a distant country.” Milne raises an interesting perspective here contrasting the past behavior of the Jews and their distant or far country of idol worship to the son's modern distant land of, “private experimentation and subjective preferences.”<sup>11</sup> Here Jesus is letting the Pharisees and scribes know that both Jew and the Gentiles have both wandered away from God. The behavioral conduct in which they both have strayed or traveled away from God is no greater or lesser than the other. In response to the Pharisees and scribes' scrutiny of Jesus for eating and fellowshiping with sinners, Jesus gently reminds them that they too are sinners. Jesus continues the narrative describing the consequences of the son's detachment from the father.

Here we see the consequences of the son's detachment from his custom of discipline as a Jew and his family's support and cultural norms. The communal detachment is like his initial detachment from his social norms manifested in his demand

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<sup>11</sup> Douglas J. W. Milne, “The Father with Two Sons: A Modern Reading of Luke 15,” *Themelios* 27, no. 1 (2001): 12.

for wealth. A few days after he acquires his wealth, the son physically detaches from the family home and relocates away from his Jewish custom and into a distant Gentile land. He engages in an undisciplined lifestyle, contrary to his life at home. Furthermore, after a brief period of pleasure, “the effects of his moral and spiritual collapse” are evident.<sup>12</sup> The young son’s foundational sustainability factors begin to be in dire need, and he is out of money, shelter, food, and friends. The son experienced a drastic change of events shifting from an atmosphere of all sustaining provision to now neglect and utter indifference. Milne contends, “the hunger of the younger son’s body is symbolical of his inner hunger of spirit for something to sustain his human being and to rescue his life from its downward spiral into oblivion and destruction.”<sup>13</sup> This is also reflective of the Pharisees and the scribes spiritual desert and ultimate consequences of their unchanged hearts.

The text states that he “joined himself”- (ἐκολλήθη). Vincent reports, “The verb means to *glue* or *cement*.” In other words, according to Vincent, he forced himself upon an unknown person who did not want to be bothered with him or want to engage him.”<sup>14</sup> The consequence of his detachment is now estrangement from the people who genuinely cared about, supported, and provided for him. The father’s financial upkeep is gone, the care provided to him from the hired servants is gone, and the social norms and acceptance of him as a citizen is gone. The text states he longed to be filled, and the allegory is not just for food but for every area of lack in his life. This too supports the theme that

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<sup>12</sup> Milne, “The Father with Two Sons,” 12.

<sup>13</sup> Milne, “The Father with Two Sons,” 12.

<sup>14</sup> Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 315.

reconciliation serves as a pathway to family wholeness in that it catalyzes his inner contemplation and ultimate return home.

*The Turning Point - Verses 17-20a*

This subdivision speaks of the young son's turning point, verse seventeen, "But, when he came to himself..." Vincent recounts, Ackermann's reflection of Plato in *Christian Element in Plato*, "redemption is coming to one's self."<sup>15</sup> Plato goes further to express, "those who know themselves know their soul and to know the soul is to know the self as it is."<sup>16</sup> The young son realized his life had hit rock bottom on many fronts; he knew he was far away from God, home, and his true self. The young son realized the magnitude of his mistake and he comes face to face with himself. He had no choice but to deal with the errors of his ways.

Polischuk picks this up further, contending that it was his "internal dialogue and rhetoric that provided the metanoia – a change of mind and the kairotic – his aha moment fueled by regret, along with his mindful detachment-suppression of emotion resorting to reliance on behavior. These meta-cognitive concepts provided a purposeful shift to take place, which fostered his decision to return."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> C. Ackermann, *The Christian Element in Plato and the Platonic Philosophy*, trans. S. R. Asbury (Edinburgh, UK: HardPress, 1861), 387.

<sup>16</sup> Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 315.

<sup>17</sup> Pablo Polischuk, "A Metacognitive Perspective on Internal Dialogues and Rhetoric: Derived from the Prodigal Son's Parable," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 43, no. 1 (2015): 60, Gale Academic OneFile, <https://link-gale-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/A409832900/AONE?u=upl1179&sid=AONE&xid=4ad407b1>.

Verse twenty (a) states “So he set off and went to his father.” Blight implies that the son’s repentance was not based on remorse, but he had no other alternatives.<sup>18</sup> The son, however, in coming to himself, came to realize down in the essence of his very being the mistake he made. He determines then to confesses the severity of his mistake; he sinned against God and his father. He took for granted the providential blessings of his father’s house. After he recounted them to himself (v. 17b), he realized the blessings of being connected to the father flowed graciously from the father and down to the servants. The son rationalized that if he returned even in the position of a servant he too could enjoy once again the overflow from his father.

The verse transitions the narrative once again as the young son manifests an outward demonstration of the inward change that has taken place in his life. The son mentally, emotionally, and now physically has turned away from his life detached from the father and makes his journey back home. His journey back is an act of repentance, turning away from sin and turning to God and his earthly father. This subsection also supports the theme that reconciliation serves as a pathway to family wholeness, in that his internal dialogue and rhetoric catalyzes his commitment to return home, to confess his sins, and once again live in the overflow of the blessings of his father’s home.

#### *Restoration and Wholeness – Verses 20b-24*

This subsection supports the theme; the ministry of reconciliation serves as a pathway to family wholeness. It also serves as the focal point of Jesus’ message to the

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<sup>18</sup> Blight, *An Exegetical Summary of Luke 12–24*, 150.



Pharisees and the scribes. Jesus provides in this discourse a tangible example of our posture and response towards those desiring reconciliation.

Verse twenty (b) states, “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.” The father remained in expectation of the son’s return, and when just a glimpse of him in the distance appeared, the father ran out to him.

The word saw in the Greek “εἶδω (eidō) means ‘to perceive’ (G1492) to know, to possess information; recognize, realize, to come to know, to understand, and to be able to use knowledge. The third interpretation supports the narrative best; it states, “to see mentally, perceive, ιδέσθαι ἐν φρεσίν ‘to see in his mind’s eye.’”<sup>19</sup> The father knew his son had been through a lot. He also knew it took a lot for the son to return home. When he saw him, he saw all of him, in his hurt, disappointment, guilt, and low self-esteem. Nevertheless, the father ran out to him. Culpepper illuminates that the father’s response to run out to his son was not a dignified response per the ancient Palestinian culture, grown men did not run.<sup>20</sup> Jesus parallels the cultural indignation of the father’s running to his son to his present indignation of eating with tax collectors and sinners. Both convey to the onlookers that expressing joy over the recovery of the lost far outweigh the responder’s indignation. Jesus very publicly conveys through the father’s actions that the ritualistic norms and expectations of others are less important than the reconciliation between man and son.

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<sup>19</sup> Tyndale House, “Luke 15,” Step Bible, <https://stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15&options=HVNUG>.

<sup>20</sup> Alan R. Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, *Luke* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2015), 250.

The verse also states the father put his arms around him and kissed him. Kiss in the Greek - καταφιλέω (katafileō) means ‘to kiss’ (G2705). It occurs six additional times in the Bible as a semblance of affection.<sup>21</sup> Culpepper contends that this also was an expression of forgiveness, one also used by King David towards his son Absalom in 2 Samuel 14:33.<sup>22</sup> What is notable here is that the father expresses his forgiveness even before it is requested. Lenski contends that “God pardons the moment we believe.”<sup>23</sup> He conveys that the father permitted the son’s oral confession; however, it was unnecessary for his pardon. All God requires is a changed heart, and that change took place long before the father saw the son in the distance.

Compelled with gratitude, the young son confesses his sin against heaven (meaning God) and his father. Blight contends the son returned not seeking to be reestablished as a family member but of the lower class as a laborer.<sup>24</sup> However, the father does not respond to the son’s confession but instead continues in his external acts of reconciliation. A response to the confession was not warranted because what mattered was the heart’s change followed by the son’s behavior to turn away from his former life and return to the father.

After the spiritual and emotional restoration is rendered and received by the son, the father continues the son’s reclamation through a series of social and cultural re-establishments. According to Marshall:

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<sup>21</sup> Tyndale House, “Luke 15:11-32,” Step Bible, [https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=N VHUG\\_](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=N VHUG_)

<sup>22</sup> Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, 250.

<sup>23</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 813.

<sup>24</sup> Blight, *An Exegetical Summary of Luke 12–24*, 152.

The symbolism associated with the son's return suggests that it had been preceded by *k<sup>e</sup>tsatsah*. This was a Jewish ceremony of cutting off a member of a society who had broken its rules, especially by selling property or marrying without permission. The rite could be reversed by an appropriate ceremony and in this case, it involved reinstatement as a son.<sup>25</sup>

The narrative, however, does not reflect as Marshall suggests that the *k<sup>e</sup>tsatsah* took place in this instance. The father orders, "Quick, bring out the robe – the best one," restoring his position as son within the home and community, and put it on him; "put a ring on his finger, restoring his authority as son, and sandals on his feet, reestablishing his social standing as a son and not servant. And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate." The calf, according to Blight, was different from other calves, which were in the pasture since it was fattened for some festive occasion. It was given extra food to fatten it, and there was only one such calf kept for a special occasion. The purpose of the banquet was to reconcile the son to the whole community.<sup>26</sup> The father demonstrates full restoration of the son in the home and in the world.

In the twenty-fourth verse, the father not only provides the reason for his actions but furthers our understanding of the restoration process between him and the son when the father declares, "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! The son knows the severity of his actions and has rendered himself illegitimate. He communicates this when he says, "I am no longer worthy of being called your son." The father reestablishes his place in the family by calling him son, "this son of mine." This acknowledgment of him as the son was a sharp scorn to the Pharisees and the scribes. Jesus is conveying, no one establishes the legitimacy of the children of God but God

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<sup>25</sup> Howard I. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press, 1978), 606.

<sup>26</sup> Blight, *An Exegetical Summary of Luke 12–24*, 155.

himself. Jesus declares we belong to the Father, and we are a part of the family of God regardless of the infractions committed. He further conveys there is no lesser child in the kingdom of God. Lenski further supports this by stating the son asked to be brought back into “the lowest place in the house” instead, the father re-establishes his dignified place as a son.<sup>27</sup>

The father then states the son was dead νεκρός (nekros) (G3498).<sup>28</sup> In Greek, the word means “no longer devoted to or alienated from God.”<sup>29</sup> He speaks here to his moral, spiritual, and nearly physical death.<sup>30</sup> This relates to the beginning of the parable when the son chooses to detach himself from the father which rendered him figuratively dead. He now is excited to announce, however, that he is, “(Alive Again) ἀναζάω (anazaō) ‘to revive’ (G0326) to become alive again or to recover life, or metaphorically to live a new and reformed life.”<sup>31</sup> Back home the son reestablished a newly reformed life in relationship with the father, the community, his spiritual customs, and mores.

### *Reconciliation and Managing the Entitled - Verses 25-32*

This subsection introduces another shift in the narrative and mood of the text. The others are joyously celebrating with food, music, and dancing, but when the elder son

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<sup>27</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*, 813.

<sup>28</sup> Tyndale House, “Luke 15:11-32,”  
[https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=VHNUG\\_](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=VHNUG_)

<sup>29</sup> Tyndale House, “Luke 15:11-32,”  
[https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=VHNUG\\_](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=VHNUG_)

<sup>30</sup> Tyndale House, “Luke 15:11-32,”  
[https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=VHNUG\\_](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=VHNUG_)

<sup>31</sup> Tyndale House, “Luke 15:11-32,”  
[https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=VHNUG\\_](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=VHNUG_)

hears the festivities and learns the event taking place is in honor of his younger brother, he is angry and refuses to enter the family gathering and the brother's celebration. This represents the posture of the Pharisees disdain of a shared meal with the Gentiles.

Luke's usage of the words music and dancing connected with the brother's inquiry and response conveys an important non-verbal message from the older brother. "Music in the Greek (συμφωνίας [*sumphōnias*]) means "symphony." It is a divertive of an old Greek word συμφωνος [*sumphōnos*] (συν [*sun*], meaning together or harmony."<sup>32</sup> In other words, through the celebration, the father attempted to re-establish a means of harmony within the family. This was an additional display of inclusivity within the family, community, and kingdom of God.

Conversely, however, the elder son's attitude toward his younger brother is not worthy of such a celebration; after all, he is the model son. He is the one who never left, followed all the rules, and remained faithful to his daily task for the father. Although not spoken, it is implied through the elder son's dialogue with his father that this man is a sinner; why are we doing all this for him? He squandered his wealth with wayward living and with prostitutes. The elder son conveys passionately to the father, that he is present and doing all that that is asked and receives nothing in return. Milne suggests that the service of the elder son was performed, "from a sense of rightness of service for its own sake, rather than as the heart-felt expression of a personal relationship to the triune God."<sup>33</sup> The parable suggests the elder son like the Pharisees and scribes upheld their

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<sup>32</sup> Tyndale House, "Luke 15:11-32," [https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=VHNUG\\_](https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Luke.15.11-Luke.15.32&options=VHNUG_)

<sup>33</sup> Milne, "The Father with Two Sons," 12.

view with righteousness with God out their personal interest rather than a heart centered relationship with God.

The father responds to the son, “all I have is yours” in other words, he lost nothing. He inherits his two thirds of the estate, and he remains in fellowship with the father and reaps the benefits of his standing in the community.<sup>34</sup> The criticism offered by the elder son, “I am worthy, and he is not;” is symbolic of the criticism of the Pharisees and scribes. They were abundantly blessed but unsatisfied—their preoccupation with what others receive hindered them from entering the shared community with their brothers and sister in the family of God and fellowship with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry.

The father’s attempt to restore the family relationship is negated by the elder son’s indictment of injustice and complete focus on himself and what he deserved. Milne contends the elder son, “related to his father on the basis of authority and law, not of love and liberty. He had the mind of a slave and not a son.”<sup>35</sup> He charged his father with being unjust, failing to recognize his faithfulness, or celebrating him even on a smaller scale, such as killing a young goat with his friends. Nolland contends, with all the festivities “the father made the prodigal not only equal but superior to the elder” with the serving of the fatted calf.<sup>36</sup> By exalting his self-interest over the father, the elder son commits the same self-serving infraction against the father’s the younger son. The father now has two

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<sup>34</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Anchor Yale Bible*, vol. 28A, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 1076-1077.

<sup>35</sup> Milne, “The Father with Two Sons,” 16.

<sup>36</sup> John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B, *Luke 9:21-18:34* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016), 789, Kindle.

prodigals in the home. Culpepper states it best both sons “have learned to demand their rights before they have learned the value of relationships.”<sup>37</sup> Neither son is worthy of the father’s compassion, but he looks beyond their faults and desires and actively engages them with his love and compassion.

As a result of the father’s deamination for family harmony, the father calls him son, despite the elder son’s failure to address his father respectfully as a father. The father also reminds him that the person he is speaking about is his brother also. He then compassionately reaffirms his love for the elder son and reaffirms all the blessings of the family remain in his possession.

This final subsection also supports the theme the ministry of reconciliation serves as a pathway to family wholeness. The father conveys his acceptance of one does not negate his love and acceptance of another. What the father desires most is to have them together harmoniously.

### *Theological Interpretation*

There are many theological interpretations to derive from this text including some contemplated, alienation from family, foolish living, the power of self- talk, the awakening, joy of repentance, the power of forgiveness, and the struggle of brotherly love. Verse twenty (b) constitutes the theological center for Luke 15:11-32. It reads, “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” The essential element of this reconciliation motif is found in this verse. God, the Father, desires for the children

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<sup>37</sup> Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, 253.

of the kingdom to live in a loving community with one another and with the Father. In the text, Jesus models through the character of the loving father both the human and the divine process of reconciliation.

Jesus defies laws and man's expectations regarding his conduct and responds to the reconciliation and fellowship with the loss. Jesus, although patient, is corrective towards the self-righteous Pharisees and scribes, "who are, shut up in themselves and closed to the needs and remorse of others."<sup>38</sup> Jesus through this narration of an earthly father defies man's natural inclination to emotionally and physically cut off those who have hurt him and the father's family members. Jesus does not hold a record of wrongs but rejoice over what is right. Jesus, instead, holds a firm posture and readied position to receive anyone who chooses to return. Not only does the father receive them, but also the Father restores them entirely within the family of faith. The Father restores them internally as well as externally. Jesus does not require those who do wrong to grovel for fellowship or lengthy confessions for forgiveness; all Jesus requires is a changed heart. Jesus will extend grace toward the returned freely. Jesus quickly and very decisively extends unmerited favor and love and then culminates this great work with a celebration in which all are invited to enter.

### *Hermeneutical Transfer*

Today one does not have to travel far to witness or experience breakdowns, separations, and loss (here to be used interchangeably) within the family. Family separations occur in many forms across the nation and world. There are breakdowns in

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<sup>38</sup> Milne, "The Father with Two Sons," 17.



the nuclear family, church family, work-family, social family, and even the political family, to name a few. Across the nation, unhealthy relationships are pervasive with no desire to reconcile them insight. Historically, persons would keep family relationship issues quiet particularly if they were negative. Today most vividly in our political arena, unhealthy relationships consistently flood the nation's airway. People are refusing to talk, compromise, cross the aisle, show compassion or empathy for others' plight. People suffer in this life simply because they disagree. Moreover, personal relationships are just as harsh through social media break-ups on virtual display for every follower to see and engage in a comment, while too many others simply suffer in silence. It appears the modus operandi for conflict is more conflict and disengagement. It is as if the world is saying, "you stand in your corner, and I will stand in mine." "I do not need you anyway." Too often according to Milne conversion and attempts towards reconciliation are met with distrust, suspicion, and disapproval.<sup>39</sup> This is apparent in the behavior of the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus, however, teaches through this text; that this is not how the family of God is to operate and it does not please the Father.

Now, understandably wherever people commune together, there is bound to be some cause in which breakdown, separation, and loss will occur. This separation has occurred since the beginning of time; first, with Cain and Able. Throughout the ministry of Jesus' narrative through Luke's gospel, Jesus is attentive to relationships in the community and dedicated his time cultivating not only his relationships but teaching others the essence of kingdom relationships. Most of all, Jesus exuded compassion, especially on the seemingly outcast and downtrodden, and Jesus never ignored or rejected

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<sup>39</sup> Milne, "The Father with Two Sons," 12.

the community. Where would the nation be today if everyone embraced community as Jesus did?

Culpepper resounds:

The parable leaves one to the question, if, whether the elder brother joined the celebration. Did he go in and welcome his brother home, or did he stay outside pouting and feeling wronged? The parable ends there because that is the decision each of us must make. If we go in, we accept grace as the Father's rule for life in the family.<sup>40</sup>

The work of the faith community is not to shield the community from the separation, "for in this life, we will have trouble." However, it has the responsibility to support the community through separation and provide a safe place in which it may enter the restorative process. The tenants of reconciliation may be learned and engaged. A healthy community requires healthy relationships, and the ministry of reconciliation serves as a pathway to family wholeness after separation has occurred.

### *Synthesis and Conclusion*

In conclusion, the study of Luke 15:11-32 supports the project theme of reconciliation and is foundational to the doctoral project because it teaches how family wholeness is obtained through the ministry of reconciliation after separation. Human relationships are complicated, but they are not destined for despair. Jesus ate with the tax collectors and the sinners because Jesus understood the significance of rejoicing when the lost are found and restored. Jesus understood the family of God is inclusive and not exclusive. Jesus understood when the family communes collectively, heaven rejoices.

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<sup>40</sup> Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, 253.

In the quest for our understanding, Jesus teaches through the text, the tenants of the restorative process. Jesus illuminates the complexities within the narrated family, which exists in the life of every family. These complexities compel our heavenly Father and our God to lead the way towards wholeness and welcome all into the divine family when a change in life is made. Nolland pushes this further in stating, “It is the father who takes the initiative in the restoration of the family relationship. The son can do no more than come within reach; he does not even realize what is possible with the father.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, when we commit to process and exude the heart of reconciliation, “eyes have not seen, ears have not heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for them that love him” (1 Cor. 2:9). The father regained his son; the son regained his father’s social standing and authority, communal respect, and fatherly provision.

Hart perhaps provides the most appropriate summation when he states,

One may see in the father in the story as manifesting human fatherhood in compassion in his running to his son, and one may also see God as forgiving sins and brushing aside human (and religious) rules and regulations. The phenomenality of sin consists in allowing death to come forward (through the son’s insolent request that breakaway Law), and the phenomenality of God is registered in love impulsively coming forward, freely manifesting itself by way of overwhelming compassion for both sorts of people, the younger and the elder sons.<sup>42</sup>

We all have a place in the family of God. That place is not contingent upon the worldly logic of rituals or observances. Our acceptance by God is not regulated by community regulations or our relational status with one another. Within God’s family, there are no place categories for we are all equally loved and have the attention and provision of our

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<sup>41</sup> Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 790.

<sup>42</sup> Kevin Hart, “The Manifestation of the Father: On Luke 15:11–32,” in *Phenomenologies of Scripture*, ed. Adam Y. Wells (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2017), 102-103, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1xhr610.7>.

heavenly father. This is the central lesson Jesus was conveying to the Pharisees and scribes. Nolland surmises it another way, “Their place with God remains secure; their inheritance is undisturbed. However, they should not imagine that they have a claim upon God that excludes others. Nor should they imagine that their faithful efforts place God in their debt or oblige him to give them some distinctive recognition.”<sup>43</sup> Truthfully, none of us are deserving of the gracious love of the Father. We simply receive it because God chooses to extend it upon our lives. Who are we therefore, to condemn others for what we do not even deserve ourselves? The audaciousness of man to look down on the Son of Man in contempt for extending freely such grace towards us all.

Finally, the focal pericope brings the reader into the revelation of God and God’s active presence and involvement in family reunification through the ministry of reconciliation. This passage demonstrates that family reconciliation after separation can be challenging to achieve. All too often we, like the elder son, and like the Pharisees and scribes remain entrenched in our oppositions rather than open to the possibilities and blessings that come with embracing the changes the gospel brings.<sup>44</sup> Not everyone is happy and ready to celebrate upon a family member’s return. However, steps towards family wholeness are the choice of each family member to engage or not to engage. This project seeks to help families understand the complexities of family reunification and provide a theological basis for growth and support. This text will serve as the central discussion point during project implementation to support families who desire to engage

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<sup>43</sup> Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 788.

<sup>44</sup> Milne, “The Father with Two Sons,” 12.

in reconciliation and establish a means for family wholeness through a six-week Bible study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

The historical foundations chapter seeks to support the theme; the ministry of reconciliation serves as a pathway to family wholeness. The chapter provides an analysis of the Emancipation (January 1, 1863) and Civil War (April 12, 1861- May 13, 1865) period. It examines the effects of slavery and its Domestic Slave Trade on slave family separations. The search for family post-Civil War and the challenges experienced when seldom family reunification occurred. This chapter will review the life of Robert Glenn, a slave sold at the age of eight years old, and his personal experience as a freed slave reunited with this family. It will also review the reflection of Louis Hughes and his two experiences of family reunification after slavery.

The Domestic Slave Trade section of this chapter will discuss how the domestic trading of slaves was a big business and served as the south's economic engine and the trading of goods both nationally and internationally. It will examine the monetary value of slaves, which drove the demand for more slave bodies, dead or alive and at every stage from life, from the unborn to the grave. This section will also discuss the enormous impact that slave trading had on the institution of African American (or Black) families and how frequent separations contributed to family instabilities and anxiety over potential separations.

The Civil War and Emancipation section will explore how the telling of the inhumane conditions of slavery and frequent family separations through the narration of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* raised the national consciousness of the sheer horrors of slavery. Moreover, how it influenced the northern union states to advocate against the expansion of slavery in the United States. This section discusses how, as the opposition to slavery grew, so did the tensions between the north and south. The Civil War erupted between the confederate and union states with the aim of the confederate states gaining self-rule over government rule. President Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation dispossessed the states in rebellion of their most prized possession, their property of slaves. The aim of the war then shifted from states' rights to human rights. Upon the war's conclusion, African Americans set out on a relentless search for their loved ones separated through the slave trade.

The search for family section highlights the limited information and resources African American people had to help them search for their family members. This section examines the methods used in seeking whatever information they could obtain. It also highlights the former slave Thomas Chaplin's account of what the family search was like during that time. Lastly, this section discussed the trauma of the ambiguous loss of loved ones never recovered, and although reconciliation of lost loved ones was rarely obtained, the search was fueled by hope more than despair.

The challenges of reunification section explore the fact that family reconciliation rarely occurs how one might imagine. The reality of reconciliation is often vastly different from the dreams held of it. There are complications far beyond the moments of joyful tears and the warm embrace of kindred spirits. In this section, the hopes and

dreams of reconciliation give way to the disappointment of remarriages, persons unable to recognize or remember a family member, or no emotion at all, because the encounter was too overwhelming.

The reunification narratives capture the reflections of two former slaves and their reconciliation experiences. This section will share the experiences of Robert Glenn and Louis Hughes; it will further highlight the methods they used in locating their kindred and capture a reflection on the actual reconciliation experience.

Finally, the conclusion will surmise how this crucial time in American history underpins this historical foundation. It examines the origin of family disruptions caused by the slave trade, the efforts exhausted in reconciling with a lost loved one, and examining the complications with reconciliation. It undergirds the light of hope in the recompilation of successful family reconciliation through the experience of Robert Glenn and Louis Hughes. Family reconciliation within the African American community has been a long and hard journey through disappointment, ambiguous grief, happiness, and celebration; nevertheless, to bond with family remain at the very soul of the African American liberation experience.

### **The Domestic Slave Trade**

The Slave Trade Act of 1807 prohibited the importation of new slaves into the United States; this federal law took effect on January 1, 1808. As a result, the Domestic Slave Trade began and thrived until approximately 1860 in the United States (U.S.).<sup>1</sup> As a result of no new slaves being imported into the United States, the need for the internal

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<sup>1</sup> Adiele E. Afigbo, "Africa and the Abolition of the Slave Trade," *William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 66, no. 4 (2009): 708, <http://www.jstor.org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/stable/40467537>.



or domestic trading of slaves as a commodity increased significantly and was fortified by the enormous capitalistic gains and the increased demand for supply both domestically and internationally.<sup>2</sup> According to Berry, enslaved persons held monetary value for the dominant culture throughout every phase of their lives. The population of this very profitable commodity grew through human reproduction and their trading. Berry reports, “even the unborn children of expectant mothers were marked with a monetary value. Furthermore, when an enslaved person died, money was received for the body. Medical schools and major institutions even paid to receive the dead bodies of the enslaved and harvested them for dissection and study.”<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt, slavery was big business and the economic engine of the south, and according to Williams, “the slave trade was the coldest and stark element of it.”<sup>4</sup>

The main driving force of the slave trade was the increased demand for cotton production. With Eli Whitney’s cotton gin’s invention, cotton production vastly increased in the United States and thus increased the demand for the slave to harvest the cotton. Cotton grew to be the leading export for America.<sup>5</sup> This economic win-fall drove the trading of the enslaved, and it drove not only the frequency of the trading of slaves but also the price of their trade. The south’s financial industry was dependent upon the

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<sup>2</sup> Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017), 5, Kindle.

<sup>3</sup> Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 27, Kindle.

<sup>5</sup> Sven Beckert, “Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 5 (2004): 1405-438, <https://doi.org/10.1086/530931>.

agricultural work of the enslaved and their movement from one cotton plantation to another cotton plantation across the southern and western parts of the United States

Professional traders conducted the south and west movement of slaves. Austin Woolfolk of Baltimore, John Armfield of Washington, DC, Rick Ballard of Richmond, Isaac Franklin of Tennessee, and New Orleans were the wealthiest and notable tradesmen of the south and west.<sup>6</sup> These men alone moved several thousand enslaved people from Virginia, Maryland to Mississippi, and Louisiana. As capitalists, they were attuned to supply and demand and had a keen understanding of how markets were related.<sup>7</sup> There were also international investors heavily linked to the United States' internal slave trade and its goods produced and sold.

While slavery was a big business and the most significant economic engine of the south and west, Williams reports, "The domestic slave trade was the most significant cause of disruption of African American families; historian Michael Tadman estimates that between the years of 1820 and 1860 approximately 200,000 enslaved people per decade were sold."<sup>8</sup> This thriving American economic engine caused families disruptions and fostered widespread family insecurities and anxiety of potential separations. Family separation according to Williams, "occurred in one of three possible scenarios: sale away from parents, sale with mother away from father, or sale of mother or father away from child."<sup>9</sup> Williams describes the effects of the slave sale, "as a solemn as a funeral, and

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 25.

partakes of its nature in one important particular, - the meeting no more in flesh.”<sup>10</sup>

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s reflection in her volume of complete works, captured the hearts of many in her description of the slave trade like this, “one of the saddest things for poor slaves was that they could never long to be happy family all together – father, mother, and little brothers and sisters – because at any time the master might sell the father or mother or one of the children to someone else. When this happened, those who were left behind were very sad indeed – more sad than if their dear one had died.”<sup>11</sup>

However, some families were permitted to remain together on one plantation; however, this was uncommon. Most were torn apart by the slave trade. The Black family during this period in history, lived daily under the threat of separation. Whenever a slave owner died or was in debt or simply to punish a slave, the selling of slaves was the means to earn wealth and settle and pay outstanding debts and teach a lesson to the remaining slaves. Mothers, fathers, children, and even nursing infants have been torn away from their families and auctioned to the highest bidder, and sometimes they were sold multiple times in one day.

For the slave owners and traders, the effects of family separations were of no consideration because enslaved families were not recognized as legitimate families. After all, they had no rights as people. Slaves were only recognized as property and not legal persons. As a result, the legal union of marriage also was not recognized between one slave to another. Under the impetus to maintain power and control, slaves were prohibited from entering marriage’s legal contract. However, slaves were allowed to

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 218.

<sup>11</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin Young Folks’ Edition*, Delphi Classics Parts ed., The Complete Works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, vol. 2 (Hastings, UK: Delphi Publishing, 2017), 2-3.

cohabitate and reproduce; however, children from this union were property that ultimately benefited the slave owner's estate. The recognition of African American families would entitle the husband to be head of the household. The slaveowners could not and would not have anyone other than himself in authority. For Whites, the "legal institution of marriage enabled consolidation of wealth, determined the legitimacy and custody of children, and provided a mechanism for the distribution of property from generation to generation."<sup>12</sup> Such an entitlement would never be accepted amongst slaves. Therefore, "slave owners held the unfortunate but absolute right and authority to separate slave families through the sale of fathers, mothers, or children at any time."<sup>13</sup> Slave families suffered under the horrific conditions of slavery and their family members' trading for many years until they were emancipated.

### **The Civil War and Emancipation**

The institution of slavery separated families and heavily divided the nation; this divide ultimately resulted in a Civil War between the Union States and the Confederate States or the Rebellion States. Some believed the narrative of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which nationally informed people about the inhumanity of slavery and its frequent separation of families, was the catalyst of the war.<sup>14</sup> Others believe, however, there was another driving force. In 1861, there were thirty-four states of the United States, and eleven of these states acted to withdraw from the union and

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<sup>12</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 141.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 141.

<sup>14</sup> Gregg D. Crane, "Dangerous Sentiments: Sympathy, Rights, and Revolution in Stowe's Antislavery Novels," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51, no. 2 (1996): 176-204, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2933960>.

formed the confederate states. As new states were established and grew within the union, the divide between slave and non-slave states also grew and continued to upset the balance of power between the two. The driver of this divide was the ideology behind agriculture versus industry and slavery versus non-slavery.<sup>15</sup> The economy in the northern states was heavily driven by industry and manufacturing, and many opposed slavery, and served as an abolitionist against slavery. Blacks in the north were not enslaved and worked to impress upon the government to end not only the expansion of slavery within the union but also to end slavery altogether.

On the other hand, the southern or confederate states wanted to expand slavery as their economy depended heavily upon enslaved labor. The idea of ending slavery threatened the economic stability of the south and their way of life. As the abolitionists movement in the north grew, so made their threat to the south to eliminate their economy; thus, tensions between the north and the south grew immensely, and their oppositions erupted in war.

In 1860, after the election of President Abraham Lincoln, the eleven southern states moved to secede from the union and waged war against the north; the confederate troops fired upon the north at Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, and the war began.<sup>16</sup> States that relied on slavery for their industry wanted to self-govern. President Lincoln, Congress, and northerner abolitionists in the United States wanted to prevent the

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<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 141.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Rostker, "The Civil War," in *Providing for the Casualties of War: The American Experience Through World War II*, 81, <http://www.jstor.org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt2tt90p.13>.

expansion of slavery and the southern states' succession.<sup>17</sup> Abraham Lincoln served as Commander in Chief of the north, and Jefferson Davis served as president of the south. The Civil War was fought with great intensity and lasted over four years. Within that time, over 650,000 Americans lost their lives in the war.<sup>18</sup>

The union army suffered many defeats. President Lincoln was desperate to turn things around; he was also under tremendous pressure from the abolitionist to end slavery and establish its abolishment as the new purpose for the war. Frederick Douglas and other abolitionists were just a few who worked to pressure Lincoln to make the war about the emancipation of the slaves.<sup>19</sup> At the onset, the war focused on states' rule versus union rule; the new purpose pressed by the north was about human rights rather than states' rights. Lincoln's chief aim was to unite the country, not to end slavery. Ultimately, after many losses, Lincoln warned the confederacy after the battle at Antietam to surrender and return to the union, or he would free the slaves in states in rebellion, on January 1, 1863, as a necessary war measure.<sup>20</sup> The states in rebellion failed to concede. Over the next two and a half years, as the union invaded confederate territory, they destabilized the confederacy by announcing that the slaves were free in their territories. The war ended in 1865, and slavery on June 19<sup>th</sup>, also known as Juneteenth, is recognized as the actual anniversary of Emancipation. The ending of the war marked a critical time in American history for African Americans. They journeyed into their newfound freedom with one

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<sup>17</sup> Harold Holzer and Sara Vaughn Gabbard, eds., *Lincoln and Freedom: Slavery, Emancipation, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 81, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>18</sup> Holzer and Gabbard, *Lincoln and Freedom*, 81.

<sup>19</sup> Holzer and Gabbard, *Lincoln and Freedom*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Holzer and Gabbard, *Lincoln and Freedom*, 83.

goal in mind. That was to leave no stone unturned in their efforts to locate and reconnect with their family.

### **Search for Family**

Just six months after the Civil War ended, records reveal, “approximately 1,200 “Information Wanted” or “Lost Friend’s advertisements were posted.”<sup>21</sup> The intensity given towards the search for the missing family member after freedom was the most potent display of love and announced to the world despite the heartbreak of family separation and loss. At the core of the African American spirit, the family was never forgotten.

Inquiry ads were placed in newspapers and church bulletins seeking information about their loved ones. Many relied on the only information they had; in many cases, which was the last known information or description of the person sold, this information could be ten to twenty years old. They possibly knew the town their loved one was relocated to after-sale and the owner’s name. This information was mainly obtained by word of mouth, letters, and newspaper clippings they held onto that provided information. Others traveled long distances embarking upon the daunting task of finding their loved ones.<sup>22</sup> The frequency in which a slave was sold and traded and taking on each new master’s name was another complication of the search. Some freed enslaved people changed their names after emancipation, and this also made locating family members difficult.

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<sup>21</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 143.

Williams captures former slave Thomas Chaplin's account of the family search in this way,

Seeing each other again was the hope and the intention of African Americans who lost their families. Their search began in slavery even as they reeled from losing relatives at an auction, in a private sale, or in a caravan that accompanied a white, slave-owning family into new territory. As the runaway ads in newspapers attest, some people set out on the roads to get back to relatives from whom they had been separated. Others relied on word of mouth, sent messages in owners' letters, and wrote their letters to locate or communicate with their family members. Sometimes they knew exactly where loved ones were and wanted to make contact or to arrange for reunification. More often, they had no idea what had become of their family, and they wrestled with competing emotions of hope and despair.<sup>23</sup>

As Chaplin stated, African Americans lived between hope and despair when it came to the possibility of reconnecting with their loved ones. More often than not, many slaves lived through the trauma of not knowing if their loved ones were dead or alive.

According to Pauline Boss, a family therapist reported by Williams, this unknowing is an ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss, according to Boss, occurs in such instances as:

An accident in which a body is never recovered may even be worse than the certainty of death. "Of all the losses experienced in personal relationships, the ambiguous loss is the most devastating because it remains unclear." She explains further, "One cannot tell for sure if the loved one is dead or alive. Not only is there a lack of information regarding the person's whereabouts, but there is also no official or community verification that anything is lost, no death certificate, no wake, or sitting shiva, no funeral, nobody, nothing to bury." Williams contends that, "thousands of African Americans experienced this type of loss during slavery." Often she reports, "when an owner sold family members, those who remained behind had no knowledge of where the loved ones had gone and had no means of making contact. And the vast majority of those who were sold would not have had any way to retrace the steps of their journey on a coffer or on a ship. Many African Americans juggled this sense of permanent loss with the stubborn hope that they would find their family members."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 122-123.



For a seldom few, this stubborn hope gave way to the reconciliation of kindred loss; however, what was recovered was not always what had been anticipated, dreamed, or even prayed about.

### **Challenges of Reunification**

Family reunification was a rare occurrence, and it came with its share of unexpected consequences when it did occur. In some instances, husbands and wives, not knowing if either remained alive, had remarried, and then discovered that their past love remained alive, leaving them in a quandary over whom to choose. The reunification between parent and child was often tricky because the child was too young when enslaved to remember the parent, or now the child is an adult and no longer in need of his estranged parent in the same manner the parent envisioned. In some instances, siblings failed to recognize each other and were enslaved so young that they believed their plantation brothers and sisters were their blood siblings and their blood siblings were mere strangers.

The story of Aunt Aggie and Uncle Levi provides additional insight into the complications of family reconciliation after separation. According to the *Butler Weekly Times* article, Aunt Aggie and Uncle Levi reunited, after being separated for forty years. The couple married during their enslavement in 1843 in Morgan County, Georgia. A year later, the couple was forced to separate because Uncle Levi's slave owner was relocating and took Uncle Levi with him.

The story recounts that both Aunt Aggie and Uncle Levi remarried, and both raised families with their other spouses. According to the article, Uncle Levi discovered

that Aunt Aggie was alive when the war ended but had remarried. Years later, Aunt Aggie became a widow and had no means of support. Upon learning this information, Uncle Levi invited Aunt Aggie and her children to live with him and his current wife. Although Aunt Aggie declined the offer, the love, and memories between the two never faltered. When Levi's wife died, Aunt Aggie and Uncle Levi rekindled their relationship after forty years of separation.<sup>25</sup>

Family reunification can and does have its challenges no matter how much the reconciliation may be desired. However, these challenges can be worked through by strengthening families through the ministry of reconciliation, and it will serve as a pathway to family wholeness.

### **Reunification Narratives**

At the age of eighty-seven, Robert Glenn indicated that he was enslaved before and during the Civil War. He was born in Orange County, North Carolina, to Martha Glenn and Bob Glenn. He recounted when his owner Bob Hall died, he was eight years old. Due to Mr. Hall's death, he and his brother and sister were sold. The matter was complicated for the family because his mother and her children were owned by the Hall family. However, his father was owned by the Glenn family. When the father learned about the children's sale, he attempted to purchase them with the money he had saved; however, slaves could not own slaves. His father attempted three times to purchase him under the disguise of his master, but his attempt failed. Ultimately, he and his siblings

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<sup>25</sup> Jesse Nasta, "'Uncle Levi' and 'Aunt Aggie' Reunited and Remarried after Forty Years," *Butler Weekly Times*, January 30, 1884, *Last Seen: Finding Family after Slavery*, <http://informationwanted.org/items/show/3290>.

were sold to others and dispersed. Robert was taken to Kentucky. Robert recounts not being allowed to tell his mother or father goodbye. According to Robert, his mother was ordered not to cry over them or be whipped.<sup>26</sup> Robert reported he overheard the Whites saying, “he would never see his family again.”<sup>27</sup> Before he arrived in Kentucky, he was traded again. His new owner allowed him to visit his mother before leaving under the threat that “if he ran off,” the two girls who accompanied him on the visit to his mother would be whipped daily until he was found.<sup>28</sup>

Robert’s owner fought in the Confederate Army, and when he returned from fighting, Robert was told he was freed under Lincoln, and he moved to Illinois. Robert desired to search for his parents and ultimately found them in North Carolina. Neither of them recognized him upon his arrival. Robert recounts his first encounter with his mother, “he took her by the hand but held it just a little too long.”<sup>29</sup> Later he reports the mother asked him if he was her son. While this was hurtful for Robert, he reported spending Christmas with his mother and father in freedom and was very happy.

Louis Hughes recounts being sold on the auction block at age eleven in Charlottesville, Virginia. As a result, he was disconnected from his mother and two brothers, Billy, and William. Louis reports he experienced daily beating, and the separation from his family affected him greatly. His grief manifested into frequent crying fits. During that time, a woman by the name of Ms. Sylvia provided nurture and comfort

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Glenn, “Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter,” Library of Congress, 328-339, <http://memory.loc.gov>.

<sup>27</sup> Glenn, “Federal Writers’ Project,” 328-339.

<sup>28</sup> Glenn, “Federal Writers’ Project,” 328-339.

<sup>29</sup> Glenn, “Federal Writers’ Project,” 328-339.

to him and gave him extra treats to console his grief. Then one day, according to Louis, he had, “grown to the idea that it was useless to cry and tried hard to overcome my feeling” this exercise according to Williams was, “another lesson an African American child had to learn: how to move on despite the pain.”<sup>30</sup>

After Emancipation, Louis and his wife were fortunate enough to experience two family reunifications. His wife was reunited with her mother and her two sisters, and neither of them had any expectation that they would ever see each other again.<sup>31</sup> Sometime later, Louis reunited with his brother. The connection was made by a co-worker who happened to have worked with both at different times. The co-worker expressed the kindred resemblance they held and sparked the curiosity that began Louis’ search for his brother. They were reunited in Cincinnati as the key identifier was his brother’s missing forefinger that Louis accidentally chopped off when they were children. When they met, the missing forefinger served as the only memorabilia that connected the two of them. Both were overjoyed by the reunion, although it started with a prolonged silence, they embraced, and Louis fellowshiped at his brother’s home with his family. They admitted they had no memories of one another. The two men spent the night sharing their life stories and the hardships of their enslaved experiences. Louis reports, “it was wonderful that we should have met again after so long a separation. The tie between us seemed never to have been broken.”<sup>32</sup> Billy reported attempting to relocate his mother

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<sup>30</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 41.

<sup>31</sup> Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom—The Institution of Slavery as Seen on the Plantation and in the Home of the Planter* (Miami, FL: Mnemosyne Publishing, 1969), 203-204, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lhbc.21103/?st=gallery>.

<sup>32</sup> Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 203-204, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lhbc.21103/?st=gallery>.

at the old Virginia home but found no evidence of her.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, Louis never reunited with his mother or second brother. Louis also never reported if he and his brother Billy maintained their connection. Louis left Cincinnati and returned home, he said, “with a renewed vigor, and praise to God for his partial restoration of the broken tie of kindred.”<sup>34</sup>

### Conclusion

The Emancipation executed by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, and the Civil War, which occurred between 1861 and 1865, was a crucial time in American history, mainly African American history. This historical time underpins the doctoral project’s theme that the ministry of reconciliation serves as a pathway to family wholeness after separation.

The origin of the African American family disruptions undoubtedly formed its genesis in the institution of slavery and its trading of enslaved people. Failing to recognize African American persons, first and foremost, as people and not commodities or property provided the ideology and avenue for frequent trading to settle debts, punish enslaved people, and gain financial capital in ways the slave master deemed fit. Failing to recognize the mere institution of marriage between enslaved people and their offspring delegitimized the family unit and legitimized the slave owner’s handling of each member as property. For mainstream Americans, the family institution provided benefits to them that enslaved people were not entitled to, for such entitlements were in direct

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<sup>33</sup> Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 203-204, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lhbcbb.21103/?st=gallery>.

<sup>34</sup> Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 203-204, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lhbcbb.21103/?st=gallery>.

opposition to the slave master's interest. For instance, the head of the household status is typically held by the home man; however, there could only be one person in charge of Blacks, the slave master. Custody of the children did not belong to the husband or the wife in Black families because the slave owner deemed all of them, men, women, and children, as his property.

Moreover, the right to have a property and establish a home where the family could enjoy communion peacefully only held a place in the African American imagination. Enslaved people did not have rights and were not entitled to such things, even family, nor the fundamental elements which support its institution. If Whites recognized the union of African American marriages as a legitimate family unit and its fundamental rights as a family institution, this recognition would strip away the power and control of slave owners and ultimately jeopardized their economy of a free labor market.

Although this period in history was the darkest of times for African Americans, the ending of the Civil War provided a period in history that marked a significant opportunity for transition for African Americans and their institution of the family. This time provided African Americans with the opportunity to reconcile lost relationships and close gaping wounds caused by family separation and clear the chasm of ambiguous loss. Williams sums up this section best as she states, "if the emblem of slavery was the denial and destruction of family bonds; then the vision of an emancipated future rested upon the security of family and kinship."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> K. Field, "The Violence of Family Formation: Enslaved Families and Reproductive Labor in the Marketplace," *Reviews in American History* 42, no. 2 (2014): 255–264, <https://www-jstor-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/stable/pdf/43661663.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A6ef87897df15b0281fe4f5713b7a419>.

The journey towards a secure future and the reconciliation of family kinship for African Americans have not been comfortable. The hope and desire for a reconciled family fueled unprecedented searches for loved ones. Although many searches were unsuccessful, a few resulted in a significant rekindling. With some of those rekindling moments also come moments of great disappointment and quandary about who to be loyal to now and how to be kindred with someone you simply do not remember. Even in those awkward moments, there was a joy merely knowing someone related to them remained alive.

Today, unfortunately, family reconciliation, in some instances, continue to be a struggle in the African American community. There are struggles with abandonment, unforgiveness, and unresolved hurts. The residue of slavery and institutionalized racist systems of bondage continue today to contribute significantly to the unsuccessful reintegration and the sustainability of the Black family. The reunification stories of Robert Glenn and Louis Hughes continue to provide hope for today that the ministry of reconciliation serves as a pathway to family wholeness after separation.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

The theological foundations chapter seeks to support the theme, the ministry of reconciliation serves as a pathway to family harmony. The chapter also supports the working hypothesis that if participants engage in a Bible study that focuses on the spiritual discipline of reconciliation, then they will possess the knowledge and the skills necessary to increase harmony and decrease alienation with their family members. The project seeks to promote family wholeness by providing social and spiritual support to congregants desiring reconciliation.

The chapter is composed of four overarching theological themes which support liberation for an oppressed people. The chapter examines the classical and contemporary theologians who have influenced Black Liberation Theology. The Liberation Theology section of this chapter introduces the origin and genesis of God's participation in the human struggle for liberation in the context of the daily lives of the oppressed. Liberation Theology underpins Black Liberation Theology, the grounding theology for this doctoral project, by providing an overview of the historical development and theological understanding of God's advocacy and work on behalf of the lives of the oppressed. The chapter discusses Latin America's plight, the greedy and powerful, and oppression of the weak and powerless. The chapter underscores the indifference of suffering shown by the



church, and ultimately, how Liberation Theology serves as the theological turning point among the clergy to seek liberation for the suffering people. The clergy began to focus its message and work on the people rather than the powerful. This theology of liberation aided in the church's understanding of its role and responsibility in the lives of ordinary men and women.

Liberation Theology contends that the church's focus and responsibility should not rest on philosophical assumptions about God but being relevant through social action in Christians' lives addressing the issues of oppression within their social context. The theology of liberation is influential worldwide, specifically for this project; its influence informs Black America and South Korea's liberation theologies discussed herein.

The Black Liberation Theology section of this chapter provides an overview of the movement of the Black church out of its places of invisible worship into public worship after the Emancipation. This move necessitates a common theological language and framework to underpin what it means to be Black and Christian in America. It discusses how the realities of racial injustice coupled with the church's involvement in anti-racism activist work of both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement in the 1960s provoked the need to ascertain the church's role in White America. James Cone contests in the absence of White theologians to address African Americans' injustices, a Black Theology is necessary. He believes the church is not a mere institution of social justice, but an institution committed to joining God's divine liberating work demonstrated in Exodus and throughout the sacred text.

James Deotis Roberts adds, “the gospel both liberates and reconciles us to God and each other.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, liberation must also encompass reconciliation. He seeks not only to confront oppressors of their wrongs but stresses the need for the oppressor and the oppressed to find a means by which to co-exist as equals. Roberts establishes racism is sin, and in order for liberation and reconciliation to occur, a recentering away from self-glory and disdain for others is necessary. Salvation from our estrangement from God is received only through our faith in Christ. However, first, there must be an acknowledgment of sin. Kelly Brown Douglas underscores and contemporizes this belief and says, “a truth-telling and a restorative letting-go of the very privileges of whiteness”<sup>2</sup> are necessary for both liberation and reconciliation. Douglas calls for the White church to determine where its commitment lies in being White or being church. Is the White church in America willing to embrace the Latin Americans’ example of social reform for the benefit of all people, or will the American church continue to hold onto its sinful legacy of White supremacy?<sup>3</sup>

The Minjung Theology section of this chapter provides additional support to the project’s Black Liberation Theology groundwork contending the gospel must speak to both the powerful and the powerless, and that God does not eliminate one over the other but ministers to both. Minjung Theology provides additional illumination of the need for liberation and reconciliation to take place for both the oppressor and the oppressed. It

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<sup>1</sup> Deotis J. Roberts, “Black Theology in the Making,” *Review and Expositor* 70, no. 3 (1973): 326.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, “Racial Justice and Reconciliation: Do We Want to Be White, or Do We Want to Be Church?” ECF Vital Practices Blog, <https://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/845/do-we-want-to-be-white-or-do-we-want-to-be-church>.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas, “Racial Justice and Reconciliation,” <https://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/845/do-we-want-to-be-white-or-do-we-want-to-be-church>.

supports further Roberts' grounding principle that the gospel message seeks liberation from the estrangement of all oppressors regardless of race. Moreover, liberation must also encompass reconciliation, and both oppressors and oppressed must find a means to co-exists as equals. The section begins with an overview of its historical development and theological framework towards understanding God's work among the Minjung – people.

The Minjung are those in anguish politically, exploited economically, alienated socially, and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters, and God's work in relieving their han – resentment and unresolved despair. Minjung, the people's theology founded by Ahn Byung Mu in South Korea, believes "theology must address the oppressed inner dynamics."<sup>4</sup> The Latin American and Black American liberation theological thoughts focus on the external forces of oppression. Minjung, conversely, focuses on the inner suffering of the oppressed. For this project, the two areas of foci are not in conflict but complement one another and provide a holistic approach to ministry.

Dr. Andrew Sung Park challenges the church contemporarily, stating that the church must minister to both victimizer and victim, and our failure in doing so renders the gospel one-sided and incomplete. Under the Minjung framework, Park believes, "Salvation is not only an internal liberation from sin but an external liberation from social sin and its strategies of the powerful."<sup>5</sup>

The conclusion surmises that people have been the subject of oppressive forces throughout the history of humankind, stemming from overt and subtle forms of

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew E. Kim, "Minjung Theology in Contemporary Korea: Liberation Theology and a Reconsideration of Secularization Theory," *Religions* 9, no. 12 (2018): 5.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Sung Park, *From Hurt to Healing: A Theology of the Wounded* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 28.

oppression by the dominant and the powerful. Unfortunately, today, the han of the marginalized continue to seek relief. Many churches remain indifferent and silent towards the plight of hurting people. The theologies discussed in support of Black Liberation Theology illuminate the church's responsibility to ensure that no one is excluded from just and humane living conditions. They provide a framework in which the church can carry forth its responsibility towards evangelism and social responsibility.

### **Liberation Theology**

The genesis of Liberation Theology is formed in the Latin American Catholic faith tradition.<sup>6</sup> Liberation Theology is known initially as the Poor's Theology and arose out of the gross contempt of greed exercised by the powerful, both political and spiritual, at the poor's expense. Latin Americans, Lee Reports, experienced "inequitable distribution of profits, excessive taxes, slave trafficking, political corruption, and indifference from the church regarding the impacted victims."<sup>7</sup> The church grew in influence both economically and politically by the same systems that crushed the poor, and to no avail, the poor's weak cries for relief grew faint as they grew hopeless for change under its authority's governmental regime.

A theological shift occurred during the 1960s among the clergy. They realized a greater need for the empowerment of the marginalized rather than charity to improve and sustain the lives of poor. The Catholic church began its work to illuminate the disparities

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<sup>6</sup> Chris Cook, *Dictionary of Historical Terms*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1998), 203.

<sup>7</sup> Hong Jei Lee, "The Comparative Study of the Christology in Latin American Liberation Theology and Korean Minjung Theology" (PhD diss., British Library Document Supply Centre, 1990), 2.

between the powerful and the powerless by confronting poverty and social injustice in Latin America.<sup>8</sup> The theology which undergirded the clergy in this work is the belief that “a vital theology must be in response to the social, economic, and political factors which are real.” A “theology that is not conditioned on philosophical assumptions about knowledge, revelation, the existence of God, or one’s Christian experience, but on its social context.”<sup>9</sup> Based on this premise, Lee reports, the church’s responsibility is to identify with and fight on behalf of the poor in their context.

In further support of this theology of the poor, a Dominican priest named Gustavo Gutierrez published a work entitled, *A Theology of Liberation*. In this work, he proclaimed that “Christ liberates the human race from sin, which is the root of all disruption of friendship and all injustice and oppression.”<sup>10</sup> He believed, “God’s preference was for the insignificant, marginalized, unimportant, needy, despised, and defenseless.”<sup>11</sup> Through Gutierrez’s work, he coined the phrase “preferential option,” meaning the universality of God’s love, which excludes no one.<sup>12</sup>

Gutierrez’s essential understanding of God’s activity in the lives of the poor and marginalized was supported through the prophets’ proclamation who spoke truth to power in condemning the despaired treatment of the oppressed.<sup>13</sup> As a result of his

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<sup>8</sup> Lee, “The Comparative Study of the Christology,” 2.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, “The Comparative Study of the Christology,” 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1974), 36.

<sup>11</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 112.

<sup>12</sup> James B. Nickoloff, ed., *Gustavo Gutierrez: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 145.

<sup>13</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 207-208.

published work, Gustavo was recognized as the father of Liberation Theology. Gustavo Gutierrez' work awakened a new level of consciousness of God's favor upon the marginalized. As a result, the Latin Clergy shifted its aim towards liberation and the work of the church positioned its attention and efforts to, "end the poor's oppression and better their current conditions."<sup>14</sup>

The Second Vatican Council convened by Pope John XXIII held in 1962, followed up by his successor Pope Paul VI in 1963, marked a significant change in the Catholic Church's official shift into Liberation Theology.<sup>15</sup> The realization of unequal and unjust social structures, according to Lee, impacted all aspects of religious life, which grounded the commitment to foster social transformation in Latin America. Henceforth, the church is known as the "Pilgrim People of God" and is charged to be at the service of the world and not in service for itself."<sup>16</sup> Finally, the church had a voice representing the powerless in which a Liberation Theology represents the ordinary people's struggle and actively condemns oppressors. It articulates God's work in and on behalf of the oppressed.

Liberation Theology is a bold and revolutionary theology that provides for this project the lens through which the spiritual practice of liberation and reconciliation may increase harmony and decrease alienation between humankind. Liberation Theology serves as a model for radical change in Latin America and worldwide. It speaks against

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<sup>14</sup> Lee, "The Comparative Study of the Christology," 21.

<sup>15</sup> Lee, "The Comparative Study of the Christology," 32.

<sup>16</sup> P. Wagner, *Latin American Theology: Radical or Evangelical?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 61.

economic, political, and social injustices, while influencing many other theological movements beginning with the Black struggle of oppression in the United States.

### *Black Liberation Theology*

The end of the Civil War in 1865 serves as a critical historical marker in the lives of African Americans. In the realm of theology, this period in American History permitted the invisible Black church to erect from their secret underground services of worship of God to public venues of worship in their newly acquired emancipation. During this time, their understanding of God shifted away from what Hopkins describes as “slave theology, or White supremacist theology,” which teaches, “slaves obey your masters.”<sup>17</sup> As African Americans read their Bibles in the absence of their White masters, they understood God and their position in God in a new light. They understood God to be a God who is just and the liberator and defender of the oppressed. The liberation of the Israelites from the evil grip of Pharaoh recorded in Exodus serves as the driving support for their newly found theological understanding of God’s activity in liberating the marginalized, igniting their appetite, and supporting their participation with God’s work for the continued emancipation for the oppressed.

The role of the Black church and its theology during the 1960s is further enticed as African Americans continued to live through the conflicting realities of racial injustice illuminated by the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Moreover, hearing the liberating gospel message of Jesus Christ that was taught and experienced in worship. Clergy and laypeople working alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black

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<sup>17</sup> D. Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology—Past, Present, and Future* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 20.

church became the living and breathing manifestation of Jesus Christ's work fighting for the marginalized liberty and justice. This new role necessitated redefining the church's role and what it meant to be Black and Christian.

Criticism of the Black church and its advocacy for societal change by its support in Dr. Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement and Malcolm X's Black Power Movement was met firmly in 1964 by Joseph R. Washington, Jr. Washington, an African American religious scholar who published his critique through his book entitled *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States*. In that work, Hopkins reports that Washington contends, "faith and religion are different."<sup>18</sup> "Faith places value in God, and religion places value in politics or a justice movement."<sup>19</sup> He claims, "faith in Christ is grounded in the European tradition found in the institutional church, and therefore, theology is grounded in and stems from the European tradition."<sup>20</sup> Hopkins reports, according to Washington, "White Christians were the true Christians and were the true defenders of the faith."<sup>21</sup> He further proclaims, "Black religious organizations were at their best were institutions of justice. At their worst, a mere organization of childlike clowning."<sup>22</sup> Washington believed in order for Black religious organizations to have access to theology, they must "close their doors and join White American churches."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 31.



The treasonous accusations of Washington's beliefs provoked outrage from Black academia and Black religious leaders. His criticism of the Black church also raised the consciousness among the church. According to Hopkins, the dominant church held a common theological language and framework that they could draw upon collectively and the Black church did not. This inadequacy paved the way for the National Committee of Negro Churchmen's founding and their published work in the *New York Times*. The Times article supported the movements of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X as well as the church's involvement towards Black power, stating, "Black Theology is faith in and witness with a God of Freedom."<sup>24</sup> This support from the clergymen incited the question within its community of Christianity's role in the African American Community.<sup>25</sup> Most importantly, it questioned what the gospel of Jesus Christ has to say and what must be done about the African American struggle. The people did not have to wait long for an answer.

### *Cone's Black Liberation Theology*

In a sharp rebuke of Washington's published work, James H. Cone in 1966 published a work entitled *Black Theology and Black Power*. Cone's rebuttal marks the first African American academic work supporting African American Churches and its quest to support the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement of Dr. King, and it is also the work of Jesus Christ as the oppressed liberator.<sup>26</sup> Cone, the father of

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<sup>24</sup> Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 40.

Black Liberation Theology, contends, as evident by the Old Testament prophets' proclamation and victorious resurrection of Jesus from the cross and the grave, that "God is active and involved in history, making right what human beings have made wrong."<sup>27</sup>

According to Cone, the need for a Black Theology permeates from the neglectful alienation by the White oppressor towards oppressed Blacks regarding its theological discourse.

Unfortunately, American White theology has not been involved in the struggle for Black liberation. It has been basically a theology of the White oppressor, giving religious sanction to the genocide of Amerindians and Africans' enslavement. From the very beginning to the present day, American White theological thought has been "patriotic," either by defining the theological task independently of Black suffering (the liberal northern approach) or by defining Christianity as compatible with White racism (the conservative southern approach). In both cases, theology becomes a servant of the state, which can only mean death to Blacks. It is little wonder that an increasing number of Black religionists are finding it difficult to be Black and be identified with traditional theological thought-forms. The appearance of Black Theology on the American scene is due primarily to the failure of White religionists to relate the gospel of Jesus to the pain of being Black in a White racist society. It arises from the need for Blacks to liberate themselves from White oppressors. Black Theology is a theology of liberation because it is a theology that arises from an identification with the oppressed Blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Jesus in light of the Black condition. It believes that the liberation of the Black community is God's liberation.<sup>28</sup>

In the absence of condemnation from the dominant class regarding the injustices in the lives of Black Americans, Black Liberation Theology provided a framework in which believers of Christ can first understand God's position on the matter. Secondly, recognize God's activity in the matter, and, thirdly, join God in his work bringing justice to the

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<sup>27</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th anniv. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 5.

matter, confidently knowing that their activities are in alignment with their understanding of God.

*Roberts' Liberation and Reconciliation Theology*

Although in initial alignment with Cone's Black Liberation Theology, James Deotis Roberts critiques Cone's theology through his work and expands the theological understanding of Black Liberation Theology beyond confrontation and critique of the dominant culture. As victims of the oppressed, Roberts believes our God-talk must include a talk inclusive of reconciliation.

Roberts believes that a Black Theology of liberation does not rest simply with oppressed Blacks being liberated from their White oppressors. Conversely, liberation for the African American community is much broader than Black liberation versus White oppression. Roberts contends the gospel message seeks liberation from the estrangement of all oppressors regardless of race. Incorporating the spiritual practice of both liberation and reconciliation is his grounding theological framework.

Roberts conveys, "the human condition of estrangement does not rest simply with Black liberation versus White oppression. Instead, liberation between Blacks and Blacks and between Blacks and Whites is critical in addressing "all sorts and conditions of men."<sup>29</sup> His theology of liberation and reconciliation informs and supports this projects mission to increase harmony and decrease relational alienation.

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<sup>29</sup> Roberts, "Black Theology in the Making," 326.

Roberts proclaims, “The gospel both liberates and reconciles us to God and each other.”<sup>30</sup> He firmly believes racism affects total life experiences, including experiences with our loved ones. The mass separation of families due to the domestic slave trade is a significant contributor to family estrangement within African American families. According to Roberts, “an authentic life for Blacks is achieved when one can move through liberation into reconciliation.”<sup>31</sup> Roberts contends that African Americans must be set free from the bondage that permeates social, political, and economic systems. He believes Whites are quick to embrace reconciliation but tend to overlook the need for liberation.<sup>32</sup> Liberation and reconciliation, according to Roberts, should not rest in polarization but must be in harmonization. The oppressed, Roberts says, “has to be liberated from oppression, oppression that is both personal and social.”<sup>33</sup>

Roberts believes, “Black Liberation Theology begins with the premise that human dignity is a birthright.”<sup>34</sup> He contends that his belief is undergirded in Genesis in the creation of man in God’s image. Therefore, since God created man in his image, all humanity is valuable to God, and to reject, hate, or alienate any man also projects the same discontent and hate towards God. Our human dignity and equality are made reflective of God’s image. The word of our heavenly Creator also undergirds our nations Declaration of Independence. Moreover, it pushes the equality of man further,

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<sup>30</sup> Deotis J. Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 2005), xix.

<sup>31</sup> Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Roberts, “Black Theology in the Making,” 325.

<sup>33</sup> Roberts, “Black Theology in the Making,” 326.

<sup>34</sup> Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, ix.

proclaiming that, “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they at their creator endows them certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>35</sup> This declaration supports Roberts belief that, “reconciliation between the dominant culture and the underclass as “equals” should be the goal of both liberation and reconciliation.”<sup>36</sup> As we live together in an inter-racial society, we must, according to Roberts, “learn how to co-exist as well as in-exits as equals.”<sup>37</sup> Roberts contends that our existence is interdependent upon one another, and his aim in Black Theology is to find a harmonious means of togetherness, Blacks with Blacks and Blacks and Whites.

### *The Need for Reconciliation*

In the context of Black Theology, Roberts believes racism is sin. This sin against humanity establishes the need for reconciliation. Sin, Roberts defines, “is centering oneself in self rather than in God.”<sup>38</sup> Through racism, the supremacist culture exalts itself above others. Roberts contends “this exaltation is a liberty taken that they do not possess.” He further describes this indulgence as “self-glory,” worshiping one and the disdain of another.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, this kind of self-glory permeates in our families’ lives as well. Nevertheless, in God, there is unity and equality from man to man, rather

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<sup>35</sup> Richard D. Brown, “The Declaration of Independence and the Mystery of Equality,” in *Self-Evident Truths: Contesting Equal Rights from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1kgqwsc.5>.

<sup>36</sup> Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 52.

<sup>37</sup> Roberts, “Black Theology in the Making,” 326.

<sup>38</sup> Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Roberts, “Black Theology in the Making,” 328.

than domination, and we must learn how to live together in this unity. Roberts believes, “Sin is vertical, it is the broken relationship with God. Sin is also horizontal, and it is estrangement from brother and sister.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, 1 John 4:20 contends that “we cannot declare to love God and hate our brother and sister. For in hating our brother and sister, there is no ability to love God.”<sup>41</sup>

The human creation is not to live estranged from one another but in a community with one another. Moreover, Roberts reflects Dr. King’s words, “the real conflict between humans and God, self, and others, results from the estranged relation with God.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, until we get right with God, it is impossible to live right in humanity. Sin, Robert says, “is a disability in an individual’s life. It also is a hindrance and a barrier to reconciliation.”<sup>43</sup> He offers, therefore, “Sin as the great separator must be overcome by the love of God that unites persons to God and each other.”<sup>44</sup> The good news is God initiates reconciliation with all humanity through his Son’s sacrificial death, Jesus Christ.<sup>45</sup> Roberts offers, “it is only through our faith in Christ that salvation from estrangement is received.”<sup>46</sup> Liberation, therefore, is the most excellent transport towards reconciliation. When liberation and reconciliation are achieved, our actions will align in harmony in the likeness of God.

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<sup>40</sup> Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 59.

<sup>41</sup> Harold W. Attridge, *HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publisher, Inc., 2006), Kindle.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 54.

<sup>43</sup> Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 47.

<sup>44</sup> Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 59.

<sup>45</sup> Attridge, *HarperCollins Study Bible*, location 120322, Kindle.

<sup>46</sup> Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 55.

### *A Pathway Towards Reconciliation*

Roberts believes the avenue towards reconciliation begins with confrontation. Confrontation then sets in motion liberation, and liberation provides a reconciliation pathway.<sup>47</sup> Reconciliation, he contends, cannot be achieved without liberation. Therefore, oppressive beliefs, forces, systems, and people must be confronted. We must call out wrongs projected onto others, and we must demand a change in direction on behalf of the oppressor towards the oppressed. There must be a turning away from repentance and a turning away from all that seeks to bind. It is only here that liberation from bondage is achieved, and humanity can move from enmity to friendship with God and with each other. This breaking of enmity and the bridging of community is the heart of reconciliation.<sup>48</sup> For African Americans, reconciliation is about creating equity and equality, closing the gaps, and building relationships.<sup>49</sup>

Reconciliation is not forgetting the past, alienated groups, and the Christians within them holding tightly to conflicting versions of the truth. In response to God's love and justice, however, Christians are called to fearlessly seek and name the truth of what has happened, guided by repentance and forgiveness.<sup>50</sup> His must involve seeking shared truth across divided lines. Deformed ways of remembering the past include denial, social amnesia, a spirit of unforgiveness, and uncritical

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<sup>47</sup> Roberts, "Black Theology in the Making," 327.

<sup>48</sup> Tyndale House, "2 Corinthians 5:17-20," Step Bible, <https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=2Cor.5.17-2Cor.5.20&options=VHNUG>.

<sup>49</sup> Chris Rice, "Reconciliation as the Mission of God: Christian Witness in a World of Destructive Conflicts," Duke University, <https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cfr/reconciliation-as-the-mission-of-god.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> Rice, "Reconciliation as the Mission of God," <https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cfr/reconciliation-as-the-mission-of-god.pdf>.

affirmation of one's group and history.<sup>51</sup> Every act seeking Reconciliation, no matter how small, matters much to God. Reconciliation's scope runs from healing in one person's life to two individuals overcoming animosities, to nations and long-divided peoples seeking to do so. Reconciliation is a lengthy and costly process. Reconciliation is not a one-time event or a linear journey of progress but addresses multiple causes and intermingle relations.<sup>52</sup>

Kelly Brown Douglas, a womanist theologian, contends that faith is about partnering with God to mend unjust earth and move us toward a more just future. This movement towards a more just future, she says, is done only by "truth-telling and Restorative letting-go."<sup>53</sup> Much like the founding work of Gustavo Gutierrez, and his belief in the prophets speaking truth to power in condemning the mistreatment of the oppressed, Kelly Brown Douglas' contemporary view from the womanist perspective declares a similar belief stating that for liberation and reconciliation to occur, there must be a:

Repentant truth-telling is not about self-serving admission of guilt; rather, it means naming how the church has been shaped and continues to benefit from the complex realities of White supremacy, and then the church must be freed from it. It is not until then that the church will be able to truly repent, turn around and do something different. In the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, "What is needed in our churches is an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts," lets those old ghosts continue to haunt us.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Rice, "Reconciliation as the Mission of God," <https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cfr/reconciliation-as-the-mission-of-god.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Rice, "Reconciliation as the Mission of God," <https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cfr/reconciliation-as-the-mission-of-god.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Douglas, "Racial Justice and Reconciliation," <https://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/845/do-we-want-to-be-white-or-do-we-want-to-be-church>.

<sup>54</sup> Keri Day, "Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God by Kelly Brown Douglas," *Theology Today* 73, no. 2 (July 2016): 178–179, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573616642348>.



Douglas goes further to state, “the church has the responsibility to show the way back toward sacred humanity by “letting-go” of its White privileges. The Episcopal Church must decide today whether it is going to be White or church.”<sup>55</sup>

In the wake of the untimely execution of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, Douglas, a Black theologian, and Black mother, seeks answers about the laws permitted to kill our young Black men and women. Douglas raises the question, “what is the meaning of God for these stand-your-ground times?”<sup>56</sup> Douglas’ question probes us to consider the message of the Black faith today in these stand-your-ground times. She concludes, “God opposes stand-your-ground culture. She describes this culture as the culture of death; conversely, the culture and freedom of God is life.”<sup>57</sup> Douglas’ Christology is fixed firmly in her belief, “because God overcomes the ‘historical evil’ of the cross, Black people are assured that the ‘historical evil’ they endure will not have the last word.”<sup>58</sup> The empty tomb of Christ is the most public declaration to every force that inflicts suffering that defeat is a fate we accept. Black Liberation Theology affirms, Jesus is God’s total representation in our anguish and oppressive places. Moreover, liberation is achieved through reconciliation, and this reconciliation is available through Christ to every person who is willing to accept it.

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<sup>55</sup> Day, “Stand Your Ground,” 178–179.

<sup>56</sup> Day, “Stand Your Ground,” 178.

<sup>57</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 149.

<sup>58</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 187.

### Minjung Theology

Minjung Theology is referred to as the people's theology, and it is also known as the theology of han.<sup>59</sup> Minjung Theology was developed in the 1970s. The father of Minjung is attributed to the theologian Ahn Byung Mu. Minjung is a term used "to refer to the suffering of the masses, a people who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated socially, and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters."<sup>60</sup> Han is an expressive term used to convey "resentment, sadness, sorrow, bitterness, grief, and regret."<sup>61</sup> Han is the collective and individual inner agony of innocent people who live in a situation that is inescapable. Minjung Theology emerged out of the recognition of the suffering of the masses in Korea.

The civil war severely impacted Korea's economy. When the three-year war ended, the working class bore the brunt of unjust labor treatment. Their inhumane labor conditions were considered a "patriotic sacrifice" to restore the country economically under the dictatorship of Park Chung-Hee.<sup>62</sup> Laborers were forced to work up to sixteen hours per day, seven days a week, with a minimal meal and break time.<sup>63</sup> Out of desperation and despair, Tae Il Chun notified the Labor Department and his city mayor, but he did not receive a response from either of them.<sup>64</sup> Chun feared reprisal from the

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<sup>59</sup> Sam Han, "Han and/as Ressentiment: Lessons from Minjung Theology," *Religions* 12, no. 2 (2021): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020072>.

<sup>60</sup> Kim, "*Minjung Theology* in Contemporary Korea," 5.

<sup>61</sup> Han, "Han and/as Ressentiment," 5.

<sup>62</sup> Seong Joon Park, "The Christological Image from the Perspective of Yuk-Jeong: A Complementary Alliance with Minjung and Liberation Theology," order no. 3633883, Southern Methodist University, 2014, 221.

<sup>63</sup> Park, "The Christological Image," 221.

<sup>64</sup> Park, "The Christological Image," 35.

government when no response was received, so he poured oil over himself and set himself on fire in public.<sup>65</sup> Through his public self-torture, he communicated the agony that his life and the life of the laboring class were forced to endure. Chun communicated the severity of his personal and communal han through his public self-torture. As a result of Chun's actions, the Minjung's struggle for liberation became visible across Korea. The working class began to display resistance against its powerful oppressors, only to face more oppression through the fear of imprisonment or death. The struggle between the powerful and the powerless birthed the work of Minjung liberation efforts and the theological framework for the church to work in alleviating the han of the Minjung.<sup>66</sup>

Ultimately, the church shifted its biblical understanding of God to be a God of liberation and a God involved in social action against powerful forces of oppression. The church's work then modeled itself after this new awareness of God to address the anguish of the Minjung people.<sup>67</sup>

The church's work and the work of the Minjung sought out systematic change from economic, military, and political dictatorship at Park Chung-Hee's hands.<sup>68</sup> Like the Catholic churches in South America and the White supremacist churches in America, the broader Korean church was initially silent and overlooked its government's oppressive behaviors.<sup>69</sup> Historically, salvation from sin through Jesus Christ drove the message and the Korean Christian church's work. The church carried this message through extensive

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<sup>65</sup> Kim, "*Minjung Theology* in Contemporary Korea," 5.

<sup>66</sup> Park, "The Christological Image," 36.

<sup>67</sup> Han, "Han and/as Ressentiment," 5.

<sup>68</sup> Lee, "The Comparative Study of the Christology," 145.

<sup>69</sup> Lee, "The Comparative Study of the Christology," 145.

evangelism efforts throughout South Korea. Nam-dong Suh, in 1983 critiques the church stating that “the church has been preoccupied with the problem of inner sin. However, the task of Minjung Theology is to “resolve the han of the people,” he argues, this is more meaningful than being forgiven for committing sins.”<sup>70</sup> Parks offers further that “there are type forms of han, han caused by sin and the han caused by evil.”<sup>71</sup> Han caused by sin is the internal affliction of the wrong we have done. Han caused by evil is the repercussions of the abuse of power on the powerless. Sam Han declares, “the salvation that is required is not from sin generated from within but from social sin and the coveting of power and dominion over others.”<sup>72</sup>

The church grew with this new focus of han towards an individualistic interpretation of the gospel and its meaning in individual believers’ lives. As a result, the central focus of Minjung Theology is its attentiveness to the han felt by the oppressed Koreans. Parks surmises that without the church’s aid, the alienated and the frustrated are left to their own devices of coping. The Minjung often “misplace their resentment by smoking it out, drinking it out, shooting it out, but they will not and cannot talk about it because their self-dignity does not allow them to do so,” according to Parks.<sup>73</sup> Parks contends further that when persons attempt to talk about their han resolution is often

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<sup>70</sup> Nam-dong Suh, *Minjungshinhakui Tamgu (An Exploration of Minjung Theology)* (Seoul, South Korea: Hangilsa, 1983), 243.

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson, *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 52.

<sup>72</sup> Han, “Han and/as Ressentiment,” 7.

<sup>73</sup> Andrew Sung Park, *From Hurt to Healing: A Theology of the Wounded* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 19.

sought with psychological remedies. However, he believes it is time for the church to become part of the remedy theologically.<sup>74</sup>

For the Minjung resolution of their han is obtained through Christ. The suffering and resiliency that Christ displayed on the cross amid his oppressors point to theological remedy and empowerment for the downtrodden.<sup>75</sup>

Christ, as minjung, suffers the socioeconomic oppression, religious manipulation, and political marginalization as any other Minjung. The death of Christ for the Minjung was not the death of an individual, but death for all Minjung before dominating power. The cross is believed to be both communal and relational because Jesus died for and as a minjung. The crucifixion of Christ is salvific because the cross brought resolution to han and its resistance to liberation. The cross of Jesus Christ means more than a symbol of atonement; it is an empowerment for the Minjung to follow Jesus' path of liberation. To be Christian for the Minjung means to follow the path Christ walked. The Minjung exalts Jesus as Messiah and joyfully shares in the commonality of the historical life and death of Jesus as Minjung in resistance to the dominating structure. The cross further symbolizes that God is not inactive or dormant in a work of injustice. Minjung Theology pushes the Minjung to struggle against resignation and defeatism, to participate in the emancipating activities of liberation, rather than be intimidated by failure. They are entrusted to live the emancipating life Jesus exemplified.<sup>76</sup>

The Apostle Paul proclaims, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18). Through this ministry of reconciliation, emancipation is received, and we model the life of Christ in our lives. Ministering to the Minjung and addressing their han remains an ever-present need today as the work of injustice is very much alive and active in our world.

Park reminds us that wounds (han) and sin (the powerful) collectively are in our pews, and a holistic gospel must address them both.

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<sup>74</sup> Park, *From Hurt to Healing*, 19.

<sup>75</sup> Park, *From Hurt to Healing*, 58.

<sup>76</sup> Park, *From Hurt to Healing*, 58.

In the pews, we find all kinds of people. On any given Sunday, the preacher could be looking out at oppressors, exploiters, aggressors, invaders, abusers, rapists, murderers, and more. At the same time, however, the preacher is likely to be confronted with the victims of these sins so that those who have been oppressed, exploited, injured, invaded, abused, raped, and bereft – as well as their families and friends are also there, waiting to hear a word from God.<sup>77</sup>

Park further cautions that the church must be mindful of offering a complete doctrine of salvation. He illuminates that the initial Korean doctrine of salvation was incomplete because it focused solely on the oppressor and not the oppressed.

The doctrine of Sin addresses the oppressor's need for forgiveness but ignores the oppressed people's need for justice and healing. Jesus came to set the wronged free from their grief and burden and forgive the sins of wrongdoers. Between the two, the wronged and the wrongdoers – Jesus was primarily concerned about the former: The main subject in the Bible was to care for the afflicted and the oppressed.<sup>78</sup> Parks believes through the Job motif; we preach a one-sided theology of a sin of repentance formula for everyone, including the sinned-against and the wounded. By doing this, we have wronged victims by applying this theology to them. Just as Job's friends attributed the sinless suffering of Jobs to Sin, God condemned them. God is displeased with the sin-repentance formula that overlooks the han of victims. We must apply a caring theology about the victims of Sin and tragedy.<sup>79</sup>

A comprehensive gospel is inclusive and ministers to the hurting and those who cause the hurt.

Minjung Theology supports the Black Liberation Theology foundation and informs this project because, similarly to Black Liberation Theology, it provides a theological methodology of addressing crucial facets which impact human life. It calls for our attention to both personal and communal han. Minjung Theology summons the church and the community to exemplify the liberation efforts through social action

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<sup>77</sup> Park, *From Hurt to Healing*, 19.

<sup>78</sup> Park, *From Hurt to Healing*, 26.

<sup>79</sup> Park, *From Hurt to Healing*, 28.

against powerful forces of oppression. It calls for a balanced approach to ministering to both the wrongdoer and the wronged, much like Roberts, who believes reconciliation is achieved. There must be liberation and a turning away from repentance, away from all forces that seek to dominate and repress.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout American history, African Americans have been the subject of oppressive forces, stemming from slavery to subtle and overt forms of institutional and systemic racism. Today, both overt and subtle forms of racism are at work in African Americans' lives, and the chasm of reconciliation between the dominant culture and the underclass is further estranged. This estrangement negatively impacts human relations on both the micro and macro level.

For the past four years in our society, we have seen the intensification of social and political division, which ultimately resulted in an embarrassing and humiliating insurrection in our nation. For over a year now, families reside in isolation in their homes under the weight of the Corona Virus. Emotional tensions of family stressors, complicated grief, unemployment, racial injustice, and voter suppression are far beyond our capacity to endure relational harmony of any sort. The despair felt among the masses externally and internally are crying out for relief.

The han of African American families cry out for Trayvon Martin, Brienna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbury, George Floyd, and so many more. Han serves as the cultural expression of resentment for the Minjung of Korea, likewise, "I Can't Breathe" serves in the same manner for African Americans. The African American theological framework

and work of the church have never faced a more critical time to render relief in the lives of the Minjung.

After careful examination of the origin of Liberation Theology and its co-laborers, Black Liberation Theology, and Minjung Theology, Cone's defining understanding of theology as "a contextual language defined by the human situation that gives birth to it."<sup>80</sup> It has never rung more relevant than it does today. The church cannot be absent or indifferent from the realities of the context in which it exists.

The Liberation Theology section supports the Black Liberation Theology foundation as it introduces the origin of God's participation in the human struggle for liberation and provides the scriptural compass of God's advocacy and work on behalf of the lives of the oppressed. Liberation Theology initiated a cultural shift among the clergy and the work of the church. The church's focus and responsibility moved from ambivalence about the human struggle and philosophical assumptions about God to awareness of the human struggle and facilitators of change through social action in addressing issues of oppression within their social context.

The Minjung Theology section supports the Black Liberation Theology foundation as it expands our understanding of the holistic approach to ministry by introducing the concept of han and the need for the church to alleviate the people's suffering. Minjung Theology supports the project theme of reconciliation by illuminating that God invites us, the oppressor and the oppressed, to join him in the work of relieving the pain through liberation and reconciliation. God's activity and his good news speak to the oppressor and the oppressed. The same God who delivered the oppressed from

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<sup>80</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xv.



Pharoah in Exodus is the same God who invited Levi, the tax collector, to join Jesus in partnership in ministry. Through Jesus Christ, salvation is available for the oppressor as well as the oppressed. Moreover, the blood of Jesus can liberate us from internal and external oppression caused by sin as he reconciles us in a harmonious relationship with God and each other.

Black Liberation Theology, our foundational theology, is enmeshed in confronting and alleviating the people's pain. Black liberation shapes the church's thinking and responsibility framework, ensuring that no one is excluded from just and humane living conditions. It stresses that the church's work cannot be indifferent or implicit through silence when the people of God are living in anguish. Additionally, it seeks to bring wholeness and resolution to unresolved bitterness toward those who have been offensive towards us and use them through liberation and reconciliation as equals.

In summary, the theological themes illuminated in this chapter is the transition of the church from simply theological thought and philosophy to a church with an active voice and active participation in confronting and demanding change regarding the social, economic, and political injustice that impacts the everyday lives of the community. The second theme raised in this chapter is the practical hermeneutic among clergy and laity that God speaks about the liberation of the oppressed and is also an active participant in their liberation. Thirdly, God, through Jesus Christ, reconciles man's estrangement caused by sin, vertical sin, a broken relationship with God, and a horizontal, broken relationship with neighbor. Reconciliation, therefore, must take place vertically and horizontally to live in harmony. Lastly, the church's work in saving alienated and frustrated people must also include the Minjung's participation in the process of their

liberation, confronting the mindset of han and alleviating pent-up frustrations of resentment and despair about the unfairness in their lives.

This project seeks to provide a safe place where han is expressed, and support is given to the Minjung in alleviating their agony caused by family estrangement. Through the skills gained, the participants will begin to see themselves like Christ through his suffering and defeat of the dominating culture and begin to view their suffering as a tool towards their desired liberation. When this is achieved, participants will be equipped to increase harmony and decrease alienation in their families.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

The interdisciplinary foundations chapter seeks to support the theme, the ministry of reconciliation serves as a pathway to family harmony. The project will explore the interdisciplinary field of psychology, and the theory chosen as its multidisciplinary foundation is Family Systems Theory, fathered by Murry Bowen. Bowen's Family Systems Theory supports the working hypothesis that if participants engage in a Bible study that focuses on the spiritual discipline of reconciliation, then they will possess the knowledge and the skills necessary to increase harmony and decrease alienation with their family members. The project seeks to promote family wholeness by providing social and spiritual support to families who desire reconciliation.

For this project, Bowen's Family Systems Theory is chosen over Structural or Strategic Family Theory because their therapeutic modality focuses on mental illness symptoms and addressing pathology within the family. This project, however, is not intended to assess pathology or focus on unresolved issues within an individual's psyche. Instead, it focuses on personal and relationship stressors that impact the family and seeks to provide a pathway toward harmony. The core of Bowen's theory supports the project mission because the approach is grounded with the understanding that the family is an interdependent emotional unit, and no one problem rests solely on one family member

but on the entire system. The system reacts to various members' emotions in the system and one's position within the system. Bowen's Family Systems Theory undergirds the hypothesis because it renders a soluble lens for helping families grow from relational alienation to harmony.

The therapeutic goals within the theory also align with the project's anticipated outcomes, which are to provide participants with the general knowledge of family systems and the emotional structures within the system. Gaining this knowledge will help the participants understand how to alleviate their alienation and increase their family harmony. Applying the knowledge gained will reduce anxiety, relieve symptoms of distress, and help the participant restore trust and fairness in the family system. Family Systems Theory and this project aim to reduce emotional cutoff and family separation.

The chapter provides an overview of Bowen's Family Systems Theory and explores his eight interlocking family relationships concepts. The chapter discusses family interactions within the system and shows its interrelated and interdependent components while highlighting how stressors affect all relationships within the system. It also provides practical considerations from the contemporary pioneers in psychology who are actively working to move families from estrangement to harmony.

The historical engagement portion of this chapter discloses how the massive trading of enslaved people serves as the origin of family disruption and disharmony in the African American family. It also discusses how external and internal stressors affected family reunification efforts after emancipation. Externally, slavery, systemic racism, and injustice contribute to family separation, alienation, and disharmony. Internally, the extensive period of estrangement caused by the splitting of families and creating new

families during the elapsed time is the source of conflict. In many instances, family members failed to remember one another when reunification did occur. The section further illuminates that, historically, African American families do not have the social or spiritual support needed to reduce alienation and maintain family harmony.

The biblical engagement section provides a tangible example and application of how Bowen's eight dimensions of the family system are identified throughout the focal biblical pericope. Recognizing Bowen's concepts and applying them to the biblical parable informs the project because it assists in identifying the concepts when heard during the group facilitation. It also helps identify where participants are positioned within their family system and where opportunities for harmony may begin to occur.

The theological engagement section discusses the benefits of how Family Systems Theory and Black Liberation Theology collaboratively work to address the internal and external threats which impact harmony in the African American family. For this project, they examine the triangular relationship between racism, family harmony, and the church's work to alleviate the pain of those impacted by the external and internal threats, which foster relational disengagement and interrupt family harmony.

The conclusion surmises that Family Systems Theory provides a framework to support the emotional understanding of the family unit. It informs where a person may be positioned within their system. Obtaining a general knowledge of family systems will aid the person who is seeking assistance in understanding how to function better within their system and how to move from estrangement to harmony.

## Family Systems Theory Overview

Family Systems Theory is a subfield in the discipline of behavioral psychology. Behavioral psychology aims to study how our mental processes and behaviors impact us as individuals and the groups in which we have connections. Bowen, the father of Family Systems Theory, believes, “Individuals are not understood in isolation from one another, but rather as a part of their family.”<sup>1</sup> The family, he defines, “is an emotional unit that encompasses interconnected and interdependent individuals.”<sup>2</sup> As family members live in relation to one another, emotions within the unit impact all its members’ thoughts, feelings, and actions.<sup>3</sup> Tensions within the unit increase the unit’s interdependence on each member. The interdependence within the system is driven by the needs, expectations, and upsets of one another.<sup>4</sup> Bowen contends, as anxiety increases, harmony is constrained, and this constrained harmony results in distress within the system. It is believed that prolonged and unresolved tension can lead to physiological and psychological stress.<sup>5</sup> Peter Titleman, a supporter of Bowen’s theory, contends, “All people have some degree of unresolved emotional attachment to their original families and that a lack of resolution has a significant impact on a person’s relational life

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<sup>1</sup> Michael E. Kerr, “What is Bowen Theory? Who is Dr. Murray Bowen?,” The Family Systems Institute, <http://www.thefsi.com.au/us/bowen-theory/>.

<sup>2</sup> Kerr, “What is Bowen Theory?,” <http://www.thefsi.com.au/us/bowen-theory/>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael E. Kerr, “One Family’s Story: A Primer on Bowen Theory,” The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2000, <http://www.thebowncenter.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Kerr, “One Family’s Story,” <http://www.thebowncenter.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Kerr, “What is Bowen Theory?,” <http://www.thefsi.com.au/us/bowen-theory/>.

throughout their life course.”<sup>6</sup> Titleman, along with Bowen, affirms that unresolved attachment is associated with a level of chronic anxiety experienced in a person’s life.<sup>7</sup>

“Human difficulties, according to Bowen, go far beyond unresolved issues within an individual’s psyche but are grounded in each person’s family system.”<sup>8</sup> Bowen believes, “many relationship problems stem from exaggerated responses to a perceived threat towards family harmony.”<sup>9</sup> Brown adds further support to Bowen’s position, stating, “No problem rests with one family member, but the problem rests with the entire system and all are reacting to the other relationships within the system.”<sup>10</sup>

Bowen conceptualizes eight interlocking components that describe family relationships’ complexities to understand the interconnectedness and interdependency within the family system. The concepts offer a foundational understanding of the family system’s basic needs and what is required to support family harmony.

### **Bowen’s Eight Concepts of Family Systems Theory**

The eight interlocking concepts within his Family Systems Theory are Differentiation of Self, Triangles, Nuclear Family Emotional Process, Family Projection Process, Multigenerational Transmission Process, Sibling Position, Emotional Cutoff,

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Titelman, *Emotional Cutoff: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspectives* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, Inc., 2003), xix.

<sup>7</sup> Titelman, *Emotional Cutoff*, xix.

<sup>8</sup> Kerr, “What is Bowen Theory?,” <http://www.thefsi.com.au/us/bowen-theory/>.

<sup>9</sup> Kerr, “What is Bowen Theory?,” <http://www.thefsi.com.au/us/bowen-theory/>.

<sup>10</sup> Kerr, “What is Bowen Theory?,” <http://www.thefsi.com.au/us/bowen-theory/>.

and Societal Emotional Process.<sup>11</sup> The eight concepts inform this project by identifying the system's dynamics and each person's position in the system. It guides the project in identifying where opportunities may exist to reduce anxiety and aid in the family harmonization process.

### *Differentiation of Self*

Differentiation of self is a measure used to assess a person's maturity level within the family system. A vital factor of this measure is "a person's ability to think as an individual while staying connected to others."<sup>12</sup> Bowen believes that a person's ability to balance individuality and relational connections is in conflict and differs over time as each person matures.<sup>13</sup> A poorly differentiated "self" or less mature self depends heavily on others' acceptance and approval. A poorly differentiated person will either adjust their beliefs and behaviors according to what is believed will please others, or they will overtly proclaim what others should be like and pressure them to conform.

A person with a well-differentiated "self" or mature self recognizes their realistic dependence on others. During the conflict, this person can remain calm and clear-headed. In times of criticism and rejection, the person can rely on facts rather than emotions in their response.<sup>14</sup> Bowen believes one's best self or highest differentiation of self occurs in a relationship with nuclear family members. He believes that relationship difficulties

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<sup>11</sup> Kerr, "One Family's Story," <http://www.thebowencenter.org>.

<sup>12</sup> Kerr, "One Family's Story," <http://www.thebowencenter.org>.

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Schara, "Your Mindful Compass: How Understanding Your Family System Can Change Your Life," Mindful Compass, <https://yourmindfulcompass.com/about/dr-bowen/differentiation-of-self-scal/>.

<sup>14</sup> Kerr, "One Family's Story," <http://www.thebowencenter.org>.



throughout one's lifetime stem from poorly managed and unresolved relationship upsets within the nuclear family.

### *Triangles*

Bowen uses the concept of a triangle to symbolize a three-person relationship system. He believes that the triangle serves as the “smallest stable relationship system.”<sup>15</sup> Bowen believes “a two-person system is unstable because it tolerates little tension before involving a third person.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, “a triangle is more robust because it can contain much more tension without involving another person. The pressure within a triangulated relational unit can shift around within the relationships balancing the pressure within.”<sup>17</sup> Bowen contends if the stress is too high for one in the triangle to contain, it spreads to a series of “interlocking” triangles. Extending this tension can stabilize the system; however, it remains unresolved because it can continuously shift around without resolution.

Although a triangle is more stable than a dyad, there is tension within this system because it creates an odd-man-out position. Living in the position as the outsider or odd man out is difficult to tolerate emotionally; thus, it produces anxiety. Often anxiety is raised simply by anticipating becoming the odd man out. The outsider or odd man out works continually to change their position; while at the same time, the insider constantly works to sure up or solidify their position within the system. The constant navigation to

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<sup>15</sup> Kerr, “What is Bowen Theory?,” <http://www.thefsi.com.au/us/bowen-theory/>.

<sup>16</sup> Kerr, “What is Bowen Theory?,” <http://www.thefsi.com.au/us/bowen-theory/>.

<sup>17</sup> Kerr, “What is Bowen Theory?,” <http://www.thefsi.com.au/us/bowen-theory/>.

be the preferred one in the triangle arouses the sense of rejection. As this emotional tension rises, the entire system is affected.

### *Nuclear Family Emotional Process*

Bowen believes four basic relationship patterns exist between parent and child, which govern where problems develop in a family unit. Bowen's patterns are Marital Conflict, Dysfunction in One Spouse, Impairment of One or More Children, and Emotional distance. Throughout the developmental years of children, children learn from their parents' verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Bowen believes that as children grow, their parents' relationship patterns also grow and develop into adulthood. The child is susceptible to repeat the parents' behaviors or avoid the behaviors they oppose. As the child matriculates into adulthood, the emotional response to tensions within relationships is handled based on the patterns.<sup>18</sup>

### *Family Projection Process*

The Family Projection Process describes how parents transmit their less mature self or emotional problems to a child. According to Bowen, children inherit many problems (and strengths) through relationships with their parents. According to Tittleman, "The problems they inherit that most affect their lives are relationship sensitivities such as heightened needs for attention and approval, difficulty dealing with expectations, the tendency to blame oneself or others."<sup>19</sup> Often, they may display feeling responsible for

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<sup>18</sup> Kerr, "One Family's Story," <http://www.thebowencenter.org>.

<sup>19</sup> Tittleman, *Emotional Cutoff*, 12.

others' happiness or that others are responsible for one's happiness, and act impulsively to relieve the moment's anxiety rather than tolerating stress and working thoughtfully.

### *Multigenerational Transmission Process*

The Multigenerational Transmission Process describes how some behavioral differentiation levels transmit over time throughout the family generational line. These habits, beliefs, and behaviors inform the "self" among multigenerational family members. According to Brown, "The transmission occurs on several interconnected levels ranging from the conscious teaching and learning of information to the automatic and unconscious programming of emotional reactions and behaviors. Relationally and genetically transmitted information interact to shape an individual's 'self.'"<sup>20</sup> The Multigenerational Transmission Process is also a conceptual understanding of the generational curse.

### *Sibling Position*

Sibling positions of the oldest, middle, and youngest work to establish role identification within the family unit. Bowen contends that our family and social relationships are impacted by what position a person holds within the family. He believes that people who grow up in the same sibling position have common characteristics. These characteristics play a role in whom we attach ourselves to relationally and how we operate in those roles.

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<sup>20</sup> Kerr, "One Family's Story," <http://www.thebowencenter.org>.

*Emotional Cutoff*

Emotional cutoff describes how people manage their unresolved emotional issues between their parents, siblings, or other family members. They use emotional cutoff to reduce or completely cut off emotional contact with that family member. Emotional interaction is reduced by people moving away from their families and rarely going home. Emotional issues can also be reduced by the family member staying in physical touch with their families and avoiding sensitive issues.<sup>21</sup> Relationships may look better when people are emotionally cut off to manage them, but the problems are dormant and not resolved.<sup>22</sup> Titelman supposes the more a person cuts off from their family of origin, the more they look to their spouse, children, and friends to meet their needs. People engaging in emotional cutoff may stabilize their intimate relationships by creating substitute “families” with social and work relationships.<sup>23</sup>

Bowen affirms that everyone has some degree of unresolved attachment to their original family. He presupposes, however, that well-differentiated people have much more resolution than less differentiated people. For instance, a less differentiated person relies on others to make decisions for them that they could make for themselves. He contends that people often look forward to going home, hoping that things will be different during this visit. They quickly become disillusioned, however, when the old interactions surface rather quickly. At the onset of the reunification experience, there is surface harmony with emotional undercurrents or passive-aggressive responses, which

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<sup>21</sup> Titelman, *Emotional Cutoff*.

<sup>22</sup> Titelman, *Emotional Cutoff*.

<sup>23</sup> Titelman, *Emotional Cutoff*.

can deteriorate into shouting matches and hysterics, leading the family to retreat to their detachment position.<sup>24</sup>

### *Societal Emotional Process*

The concept of the Societal Emotional Process describes how emotional systems in the family also impact emotions and behaviors on the societal level. The behaviors, beliefs, and responses to stressors learned within the family unit are transmitted and manifested into the social-relational context with nonfamily groups, such as work and social organizations. Molly S. Castelloe believes, “The relationship between children and parents is the strongest social tie most people experience in their lifetime.”<sup>25</sup> A regressed society she further contends, “is a society that reverts to primitive modes of expressing and relating to others undermines Familia bonds.”<sup>26</sup> A regressed person values the identity associated with a group over individual identity. They will conform to their beliefs and behaviors to match that of the group. Castelloe provides an example of perversion of morality: “Following the Civil War and newfound Black economic and political freedom, the southern states sanctioned lynchings aimed at eradicating coemption and reimposing White supremacy.”<sup>27</sup> These behaviors and beliefs which were learned within the family spilled over to the societal level to protect the power of the

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<sup>24</sup> Kerr, “What is Bowen Theory?,” <http://www.thefsi.com.au/us/bowen-theory/>.

<sup>25</sup> Molly S. Castelloe, “Defense Mechanisms: Seven Signs of Societal Regression: How to Recognize Anxiety in a Large Group,” *Psychology Today*, June 19, 2018, 1, [https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/49393\\_book\\_item\\_49393.pdf](https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/49393_book_item_49393.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Castelloe, “Defense Mechanisms,” 2, [https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/49393\\_book\\_item\\_49393.pdf](https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/49393_book_item_49393.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Castelloe, “Defense Mechanisms,” 2, [https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/49393\\_book\\_item\\_49393.pdf](https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/49393_book_item_49393.pdf).

collective group. Therefore, the identity of a group is more important than individual identity.

While understanding the nuances of family conflict through Bowen's theory lens is central to this project, some contemporary voices in psychology offer additional critical support for this project, which is to prepare participants for a meaningful exchange with family members or to cope with their disappointment when reconciliation fails to occur.<sup>28</sup> Proper preparation, Finely contends, must include thoughtful consideration of why the estrangement exists, motivation for reconnection, method of approach with the family member, way of managing confrontation, and strategy of moving forward without reconciliation.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, today's practitioners, according to Pillemer, understand "family estrangement in the form of chronic stress that results from broken attachment bonds, the pain of social rejection and constant uncertainty about the status of the relationship."<sup>30</sup> In helping others to manage their inner conflict in this space, McCoy's work is grounded on assisting people in making peace with what is. She recognizes that as some family members live with deep sadness and long for a reconnection, sometimes reconciliation is impossible to achieve.<sup>31</sup> She contends that when a person is "unrepentant, unwilling to compromise, or unmotivated to make changes necessary to continue the relationship, or

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<sup>28</sup> Susan Finely, "OnlinePsychology@Pepperdine," Pepperdine University, March 22, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Finely, "OnlinePsychology@Pepperdine."

<sup>30</sup> Karl Pillemer, "Family Estrangement Problem 'Hiding in Plain Sight,'" Cornell University, <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2020/09/pillemer-family-estrangement>.

<sup>31</sup> Kathy McCoy, "Complicated Love: When Reconciliation is Impossible Making Peace with What is," *Psychology Today*, November 20, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/complicated-love/201711/when-reconciliation-is-impossible>.

when the relationship is too toxic or abusive, there may be nothing that can be done to repair or heal the relationship.”<sup>32</sup> She illuminates, however, that there are things that each person can do to manage their inner conflict healthily and make peace with what is. First, she suggests grieving the loss. Simply acknowledge the pain and, in time, see new possibilities.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, she recommends forgiving yourself and the other person or persons. Forgiving means letting go of anger and blame. This process may require assistance from pastoral care, psychotherapy, or other outlets such as meditation, exercise, and the like. Thirdly, accept and acknowledge difficult times such as holidays, birthdays, and the like. Fourthly, beginning with yourself, surround yourself with love. Love yourself and connect with friends and another family who embrace you as well.<sup>34</sup> Moving from alienation to relational harmony requires thoughtful preparation and planning. Understanding the legacy and contemporary voices in psychology provides a framework for this essential planning process.

### **Historical Engagement**

Family Systems Theory is a combination of how we think about ourselves and how we feel about the world around us.<sup>35</sup> Heightened tension, the purview of self, and the

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<sup>32</sup> McCoy, “Complicated Love,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/complicated-love/201711/when-reconciliation-is-impossible>.

<sup>33</sup> McCoy, “Complicated Love,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/complicated-love/201711/when-reconciliation-is-impossible>.

<sup>34</sup> McCoy, “Complicated Love,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/complicated-love/201711/when-reconciliation-is-impossible>.

<sup>35</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, Guilford Family Therapy Series (New York, NY: Guilford Publications, 1985), 13, Kindle.

world for African Americans are influenced by external and internal threats to family harmony; these threats permeate throughout American history.

The genesis of unresolved tensions with African Americans' family system forms from the external threat of daily separations fostered by the domestic slave trade. Between 1820 and 1860, slave owners sold approximately 200,000 enslaved people per decade. As a result of this massive trading, the domestic slave trade serves as the most significant cause of family disruption of African American families.<sup>36</sup> The interruption of what others recognized only as the trading of human commodities fostered widespread family insecurities and the daily threat of family separation and anxiety.

Institutionalized oppression also poses external threats for African American families in that slave owners failed to acknowledge African American families as a legitimate family unit. Recognition of the African American family would entitle the family to rights and privileges that only Whites held.<sup>37</sup> For instance, Black husbands would be head of the household, and this position could never occur because the slave owners could not have anyone other than themselves in a position of authority. The legal institution of marriage would enable enslaved families to consolidate wealth, determine children's legitimacy and custody, and provide a property distribution mechanism. On the contrary, slave owners were the only holders of property and held the absolute right to separate enslaved families at any time.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>37</sup> Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 141.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 141.



Internal conflicts also contributed to unresolved strife and posed threats to the family system. Many of these threats surfaced most prominently after emancipation and the conclusion of the Civil War. That is when African Americans set out to reunite with their loved ones sold through the slave trade.<sup>39</sup> The reunification of the family did not occur often. However, when it did, it came with its share of unexpected consequences. In some instances, husbands and wives, not knowing if one or the other remained alive, had remarried, and the discovery that their past love is alive left many in a quandary over which relationship to continue. The reunification between parent and child was often complicated because they were very young when sold and did not remember the parent. The child became an adult and was no longer the little child needing their estranged parent in the same manner the parent envisioned. In some instances, siblings failed to recognize each other and were sold so young they believed their plantation brothers and sisters were their actual blood siblings.

Families navigated external and internal threats while trying to exist as a family without support or direction on a unified, functioning system. One of the goals of Family Systems Theory and this project is to help the participants manage their emotional reactions and state of being under such threats. The threats faced may not change; however, the person enduring the conditions of threat has an opportunity to change their view of the threat and how they choose to function under threat. Gaining this skill can be taught and strengthened under the Family Systems Theory model. The aim of Bowen's model is not to correct or discard the threat. Instead, it seeks to help the affected person

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<sup>39</sup> Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 143.

operate within the system with a different understanding, so there is reintegration rather than the relationship's disintegration.<sup>40</sup>

### **Biblical Engagement**

Bowen's framework of Family Systems Theory supports the biblical foundations chapter by illuminating the reality that relationships, even religious ones, are complex and filled with emotional interdependency. Luke 15:11-32 serves as the project's biblical foundation text. The pericope reveals that God is actively involved in the family system and engages each member to restore harmony and alleviate alienation.

Applying Bowen's eight dimensions of the family system to the biblical foundation pericope informs the project by providing a tangible example of each dimension's interworking within the family system. It assists this project in identifying where participants might be positioned within their system. This identification is vital in helping to relieve the han of the Minjung. Examples of Bowen's concepts gleaned within the following paragraph.

The triad between the father, eldest son, and youngest son is a three-person relationship system illustrating an odd man out defined by Bowen. The odd man out is the youngest for leaving or the eldest for his failure to accept his bother upon his return. Anxiety is communicated within this system when the youngest confesses to the father that he has sinned. The eldest son coveys his disappointment with the father for not being recognized and celebrated.

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<sup>40</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 17-18, Kindle.

Through careful reading and observation of the focal pericope, the reader can conclude the older son has less differentiation of self. He is a conformist to the rules and the opinions of his father. The eldest son serves out of obligation rather than out of the desire of his being. The younger son, however, has a higher differentiation of self. He is willing to be and go after what he wants, even if it means breaking the rules and going against the status quo. The father has a higher differentiation of self. He is willing to allow the eldest and youngest sons to be individuals and love them for their individuality.

The relationship patterns described by the Nuclear Family Emotional Process are also evident within the focal pericope. The marital conflict patterns and dysfunction in one spouse require more information to be obtained given that the mother and wife are never mentioned in the story. The impairment of one or more children is illustrated when the younger son breaks family tradition and Jewish customs in leaving the family to be on his own and live in a manner away from home in contradiction to his upbringing. Emotional distance can be explored more within the parable. There is no recorded emotion displayed by the father when the inheritance was demanded or at the younger son's initial departure. Emotional distance is seen again by the eldest son's neglect to enter the celebration of his brother's return.

The Family Projection Process is seen in the text when the younger son returns, seeking the father's approval as a hired servant rather than in his rightful position as son. An example of the Multigenerational Transmission Process is observed by the father's readiness to receive the younger son upon his return. The father himself has broken from tradition and not lived up to expectations of his past culture, which would have been to disown and cut off the son forever. The father's current behavior breaks from expected

tradition when he runs towards the younger son upon his return. In the Jewish custom, running was an undignified response, a behavior considered below his stature and standing in society.

The expectations of sibling position are prevalent throughout the focal text, beginning with the younger son's request for his estate share. His stake is traditionally more minor than the eldest son's portion. Upon returning his brother, the eldest son expresses his disappointment in the father for not being celebrated for his obedience. Yet, this wayward younger son received more than he ever did. Although the writer does not convey what drove the younger son away from home, his leaving demonstrates his attempt to solve his problem by leaving the family system and setting off for a far country. Bowen describes this behavior as the emotional cutoff. He then attempts to build a substitute family by joining himself as a citizen in the far country for support and nourishment. Upon the younger son's return, the emotional cutoff is again displayed by the eldest brother's refusal to enter the family celebration and referring to his brother as "this son of yours" (Lk. 15:30).

The Societal Emotional Process is illustrated in the text during the famine. The young son's emotional and physical needs arise; he attempts to satisfy his emotional needs by attaching himself as hired help to a father-like figure, even when his attachment is not wanted or desired.

Recognizing, understanding, and applying Bowen's eight concepts to the biblical narrative or a participant's testimony informs this project. It helps build an understanding of where the participant may be positioned within their family and where disharmony exists and lends itself to opportunities towards harmony.

### Theological Engagement

Family Systems Theory engages Black Liberation Theology as they seek to assist the Minjung (suffering people) and provide a pathway towards the relief of their pain (anguish) absent identifying and treating psychological pathology. Both underscore the reality that unresolved stressors in our family and social context impact human relationships on the micro and macro levels. Bowen states, “Our responses to perceived threats towards family harmony is the root cause of many relationship problems.”<sup>41</sup> Racism is a persistent threat to the African American family, and therefore, J. Deotis Roberts contends that “racism affects our total life experiences, including experiences with our loved ones.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, Black Liberation Theology is never detached from Black history, and Family Systems Theory is never disengaged from one’s internal family history. Because this history affects the emotional system and influences how we respond and relate to one another, it impacts the vertical relationship with God and our horizontal, relational harmony with neighbor.

Family Systems Theory and Black Liberation Theology assist the suffering towards a pathway of harmony while affirming that the suffering has a rightful place to confront their tormentors and obtain resolution. Roberts believes that resolution is gained through reconciliation, and liberation is the pathway by which reconciliation is achieved. Bowen and Roberts are similar in their approach to handling the perceived stressor in the relationship. Both attempts to resolve relational polarization and try to bring about

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<sup>41</sup> Kerr, “What is Bowen Theory?,” <http://www.thefsi.com.au/us/bowen-theory/>.

<sup>42</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, “Black Theology in the Making,” *Review and Expositor* 70, no. 3 (1973): 326, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463737307000305>.

harmonization between conflicting individuals. They assist the suffering further by helping to establish a means of understanding their context and alleviating their suffering in working towards a better life, both personal and social. Black Liberation Theology is vested in confronting and calling out the oppressor and the inhumane conditions they pose on the family, specifically White supremacists, and their ideals that impact family harmony in the Black community. Park supports Roberts from the Minjung perspective, stating, “han (the anguish of the oppressed) reveals what has been forgotten and hidden by the dominant culture.”<sup>43</sup>

Family Systems Theory and Minjung Theology both provide support to the project’s foundational theology, Black Liberation Theology. They both seek to identify and reconstruct how the Minjung (suffering) operates within a strained system. Black Liberation Theology tends to focus on the oppressor. Conversely, Family Systems Theory and Minjung Theology work with the oppressor or the oppressed to facilitate change in their understanding of the systems and how they may change and eliminate the Han (anguish) while coexisting as equals.

For this project to provide a holistic ministry approach to families desiring reconciliation, the complement of Black Liberation Theology, which confronts the oppressive external threats to family, and Minjung Theology, which focuses on the inner suffering of the oppressed, must be infused. In concert with Black Liberation Theologians, Minjung Theologians believe, “the church must acknowledge the reality of

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<sup>43</sup> Seong Joon Park, “The Christological Image from the Perspective of Yuk-Jeong: A Complementary Alliance with Minjung and Liberation Theology,” order no. 3633883, Southern Methodist University, 2014, <http://dtl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/dissertations-theses/christological-image-perspective-yuk-jeong/docview/1611976249/se-2?accountid=202487>, ProQuest One Academic, 48.

human agony and participate in social justice rather than philosophical contemplation.”<sup>44</sup>

Bowen’s Family Systems Theory further complements the ministry approach. It provides a systematic way of identifying and addressing both types of stressors regardless of whether the threat is external or internal.

Finally, liberation is accomplished through the process of reconciliation. It is available for the oppressor and the oppressed by faith in Jesus Christ. The church must be an active participant in facilitating reconciliation for all people, just as Christ demonstrates his act of liberation on the cross for all people. Jesus died to liberate the wronged and provide a pathway towards reconciliation to the Father of the wrongdoer. The church’s work must never be indifferent or implicit through silence when there is relational anguish. The church must ensure that no one is excluded from just and humane living conditions; therefore, the church’s work is evangelism and social action.

### **Conclusion and Relation to Doctoral Project**

Family Systems Theory is a systematic method of study to determine how mental processes and behaviors impact the human connections we have with one another. This subfield of behavioral psychology supports the project theme: the ministry of reconciliation serves as a pathway to family harmony because it provides a coherent framework in which family relations can be understood. The emotional and behavioral processes that impact one member in the family unit have an impact on all members. This

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<sup>44</sup> Park, “The Christological Image,” <http://dtl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/dissertations-theses/christological-image-perspective-yuk-jeong/docview/1611976249/se-2?accountid=202487>, ProQuest One Academic, 25.

interdisciplinary theory informs the project that family problems are not one-dimensional, and issues affect the entire unit as its members react and relate.

The study of Family Systems Theory informs the project by providing a soluble lens through Bowen's eight concepts of family emotional processes that guide in identifying where participants may be positioned in their family system, and where opportunities for the therapeutic goals of restoring trust and fairness and reducing emotional cutoff and family alienation can be applied. Family Systems Theory recognizes that unresolved external and internal threats upon the family significantly disrupt family harmony and, without resolution, can lead to physiological and psychological stress and impact a person's relational life throughout their life cycle.

The massive trading of slaves in African American history and systemic and institutional racism present today are continuing threats contributing to family disruption and disharmony. Family Systems Theory and this project aim to support participants, regardless of the source of the current upset impacting family harmony, as they manage their emotional reactions and state of being under these threats. This will be done without attempting to correct or discard the threat, but by empowering the project participant with skills to increase their self-differentiation so they can identify opportunities to reopen relational pathways that are severed.

Critical components of Bowen's Family Systems Theory are evident in the biblical illustration of the emotional triangle of the father, eldest son, and youngest son. The text conveys that as the biblical family lives in relation to one another, the emotions within this family unit impact all its members' thoughts, feelings, and actions. When anxiety is increased within the unit through external and internal stressors, harmony is



constrained, and distress permeates the relational system until resolution is achieved.

Recognizing that the unit's composition is a system of emotionally interconnected and interdependent individuals is critical in alleviating the Han present in the family system.

Family Systems Theory underpins Roberts' belief, in the theological foundation chapter, that racism affects our total life experiences including our experiences with our loved ones, due to our interconnection and interdependence of human relations, both individual and communal. When issues appear unresolvable, some resort to turning away from their families, rendering the dormant emotions of han. Still, the gospel seeks to liberate and reconcile us to God and each other. Reconciliation overcomes estrangement, mends fences, and breaks down the wall of separation between men. When reconciliation is achieved, han can be resolved, and true liberation attained.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **PROJECT ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction**

The project, “From Alienation to Harmony: A Model for Family Reconciliation,” demonstrates how the church of the Lord, Jesus Christ, can support families and provide a safe environment for those living through the painful experiences of relational disharmony and alienation to dialogue their experiences, gain knowledge, skills, and develop a plan for using the knowledge and skills gained in their family situations. This support from the church is essential as we live in a world that offers little guidance or help on how to restore relational harmony from a spiritual perspective.

All too often, relationships are quickly dissolved with little to no consideration for possible reconciliation. Today there is little tolerance for differences of opinion, agreeing to disagree. Some people have even less tolerance for working through complicated relationships to achieve a better outcome. Relational strife can be heard through the negative sound bites that permeate our radio airways, are viewed across our television screens, and posted on our social media platforms. Disharmony, strife, and contention have become the acceptable norm. Unfortunately, the spirit of conflict does not dissipate at the door of our private lives. Instead, it runs just as ramped throughout the walls of our very homes as it does in the public arena. Contention within the family circle can be traumatic and have a lasting impact on the entire family unit. More than sixty-five million

Americans today suffer from family estrangement.<sup>1</sup> As a result, many families suffer daily in silence with feelings of anxiety, anger, helplessness, and fear and are left to feel they have no place to turn for assistance. This reality reigns especially true within the African American community, and this community has struggled to exist harmoniously as a family unit throughout its American history.

This research project was implemented at The New Psalmist Baptist Church, Baltimore, Maryland. In this community, twenty-six percent of the population consists of husband-and-wife teams, thirty-three percent of families are single guardians, and thirty-four percent are single.<sup>2</sup> The New Psalmist Baptist Church offers over eighty active ministries, and this study provides a specific focus to support and assist families to grow from relational alienation to harmony.

The historical foundations chapter examined the root of African American family estrangement and disharmony. Family disruptions for African Americans formed their genesis in the institution of slavery and its trading of enslaved people. Failing to recognize African American persons as people and not commodities or property provided the ideology and avenue for frequent trading to settle debts, punish enslaved people, and gain financial capital however the slave master deemed fit. An additional barrier to family harmony was the failure to recognize the mere institution of marriage between enslaved people and their offspring delegitimized the family unit and legitimized the slave owner's handling of each member as property.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Pillmer, *Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them* (New York, NY: Avery, Penguin Random House LLC, 2020), 24.

<sup>2</sup> United States Zip Codes, "Zip Code 21215," United States Zip Codes, <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/21215/>.

The ending of the Civil War provided a period in history that marked a significant opportunity for transition for African Americans and their family institution. This turning point allowed African Americans to reconcile lost relationships and close gaping wounds caused by family separation and clear the chasm of ambiguous loss. Liberation for African Americans encompasses the security and safety of its family members.

The hope and desire for a reconciled family fueled unprecedented searches for loved ones. The historical appetite for reconciliation of family bonds anchored the project because it revealed a sense of intrinsic motivation to restore what was lost. This intrinsic motivation is further illuminated in the foundational biblical chapter discussed next.

The sad reality is that no matter how motivated we are, external and internal threats continue to disrupt relational harmony within the family. Family reconciliation, in some instances, continues to be a struggle in the African American community. Families who struggle with abandonment, unforgiveness, unresolved hurts, or the residue of being enslaved and institutionalized racist systems of bondage contribute significantly to the unsuccessful reintegration and the sustainability of the Black family.

The biblical foundations chapter examined Luke chapter fifteen, verses eleven through thirty-two. The pericope undergirded the project and clearly illustrated that human relationships are complicated, but they are not destined for despair. Through the parable commonly known as the Prodigal Son, Jesus communicates to us that the family of God is inclusive and not exclusive and when the family communes collectively, heaven rejoices. Jesus illuminates the complexities within the narrated family, which exists in families' lives, even today. The complexities disclosed compel our heavenly

Father and our God to lead the way towards wholeness and welcome all equally into the divine family when the turn towards a changed life is made.

Lastly, the focal pericope brings the reader into the revelation of God and God's active presence and involvement in family reunification through the ministry of reconciliation. The passage demonstrates that family reconciliation after estrangement can be challenging to achieve. Like the elder son and the Pharisees and scribes, we can remain entrenched in our oppositions rather than open to the possibilities and blessings that embrace the changes the gospel brings.<sup>3</sup> The passage also informs us of the harsh reality that not everyone is happy and ready to celebrate a family member's return. However, steps towards family wholeness are the choice of each family member to engage or not to engage. The grounding truth that remains is that the Father is always ready and willing to be in a relationship with us, and in some instances, that is all some will have. This grounding passage served as a compass for the project to discover where God actively provides opportunities to move families from estrangement to harmony.

The theological foundations chapter bolsters the project through the lens of Black Liberation Theology. Today, both overt and subtle forms of racism are at work and cause significant disruptions in African Americans' lives. This reality was most recently underscored during this project development with the killing of George Floyd in the United States. As the fight to sustain and protect African American families ensue, the chasm of reconciliation between the dominant culture and the underclass is further estranged. This estrangement negatively impacts human relations on both the micro and macro level.

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas J. W. Milne, "The Father with Two Sons: A Modern Reading of Luke 15," *Themelios* 27, no. 1 (2001): 12.

The African American psyche and soul have witnessed the blatant intensification of social and political division. Additionally, families have resided in isolation under the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic for nearly two years. Emotional tensions of complicated grief, unemployment, racial injustice, and voter suppression are beyond our capacity to endure. As our external and internal conflicts cried for relief, the ministry of liberation and reconciliation served as a pathway toward the harmony we so desperately seek. Black Liberation Theology was significant to this doctoral project because it provided a lens whereby wholeness and resolution may be brought to unresolved bitterness toward those who have been offensive towards African Americans, likewise and use towards them. The project supported the oppressor and the oppressed as they confronted the painful places in their lives and encouraged them to initiate the desired change in their areas of brokenness and unify personal relationships in Christ and at home to live at peace in a hostile world.

Bowen's Family Systems Theory provided a coherent interdisciplinary framework for the project facilitator and project participants to understand the interconnectedness of family relations. This interdisciplinary theory clarifies that family problems are not one-dimensional, and issues affect the entire unit as its members react and relate. A soluble lens guided the facilitator in identifying where participants may be positioned in their family system through Bowens' eight concepts of the family emotional processes. And opportunities for the therapeutic goals of restoring trust and fairness and reducing emotional cutoff and family alienation can be applied. This historical information is crucial in understanding the complexities of thought, feelings, and emotions in the African American congregant the project addresses. Additionally, it provides a space to

explore difficult conversations that will support families and give them tools for relational harmony within their families.

### **Methodology**

The project used a narrative qualitative research design to tell the story that if participants engage in a Bible study focused on the spiritual discipline of reconciliation, they will possess the knowledge and the skills necessary to increase harmony and decrease alienation with their family members. This qualitative research method was chosen because it provided an avenue in which the problem could be explored in its natural environment. Additionally, no predetermined information exists that focuses on the church's role in supporting and helping families grow from relational alienation to harmony. The spiritual setting provided a safe space where voices could be empowered and heard on an issue that is kept relatively silent.<sup>4</sup> This method was an opportunity for initial data to be gathered to support further research. I also chose to implement the project via small group facilitation because this was the context in which the problem was identified initially, and because small-group facilitation is a standard fabric of ministry within The New Psalmist Baptist Church, it further supported the participants' willingness to explore a very private topic publicly.

#### *Data Collection Methods*

Three data collection methods tested the hypothesis. The first was the utilization of pre-and post-surveys. Secondly, weekly focus group discussion questions. And thirdly,

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<sup>4</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018), 45.

individual one-on-one interviews. The intervention modality was a five-week, weekly, ninety-minute educational study via Zoom group facilitation studying the biblical parable recorded in Luke fifteen verses eleven through thirty-two. The data collection methods were implemented because this was the best way, based on my experience, to measure if the information was obtained and if persons had a working plan to incorporate lessons learned toward their own family or ministry situations.

### *Participant Selection*

The biblical study was advertised as “Conversations with the Father: Holding Space for Reconciliation” on the church’s website to engage participant recruitment. The advertisement for the study was also emailed to the congregation in the weekly church-wide email blast of upcoming events. The study was announced during the men’s ministry breakfast with the pastor and during the diaconate and associate minister’s ministry meeting. Participants were also solicited by word of mouth and Facebook Messenger flyer advertisement.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Participants voluntarily responded to the solicitation by registering online or emailing me directly their interest to participate. All participants were registered through the Church Center electronic application on the church’s website. Confidentiality was reinforced through a class covenant which was emphasized each session. The covenant outlined class norms and instructed participants to participate in the session in a private



safe space or to use headphones during the session time. The covenant underscored those conversations in the group are confidential and not shared outside of the group.

Additionally, no recording or photography was conducted during the study. Further, each participant was provided an Informed Consent Form to review and sign via email. The Informed Consent Form was reviewed during the first week of class, and participants had an opportunity to ask questions. They signed and returned the documents via email. Research notes, participant lists, and other identifying information were stored on a password and biometric protected computer. Given the topic's sensitive nature and potential for harm, participants were advised of available pastoral care services with a licensed clinical professional counselor available through the church if additional support was needed. To maintain the anonymity of the pre-and post-survey responses, each participant selected a four-digit number to compare the two surveys. The survey link was emailed to all participants through the Church Center electronic application in a group email. Responses were collected via Survey Monkey.

Participants included diaconates, clergy, and lay members. I was a participant-observer whose instrumentation included interviews guided by four interview questions scheduled for twenty minutes with each willing participant. Data for project analysis was captured through notetaking during and after each session of common themes, trends, and sticking points and an analysis of the pre- and post-survey questionnaire responses.

### *Intervention Modality*

The attempt to effect family alienation and disharmony changes was made through a weekly biblical exploration consisting of five sessions. Session One examined

the historical overview of the Book of Luke as well as the focal pericope of chapter fifteen. Verses eleven through twelve served as the foundation for analyzing family disappointment and focus group discussion questions. Session Two examined verses thirteen through sixteen as the foundational verses underpinning the theme of consequences of detachment. A focus group discussion and prayer concluded the session. Session Three reviewed verses seventeen through twenty-a, which focused on the turning point. It also included a focus group discussion question. Session four utilized verses twenty-b through twenty-four as its foundational basis. These verses underpinned the theme of reconciliation as a pathway to harmony. The session included a focus group discussion question. Session five examined verses twenty-five through thirty-two and underpinned the session theme, reframing the mind's eye. A focus group discussion question ensued, followed by prayer. Session six focused on the one-on-one interview.

### **Implementation**

The implementation of the project began with a discussion with my pastor about the stressors the congregants' faced regarding relational disharmony observed while I ministered within the context. After providing an overview of the five foundational chapters to the pastor, further discussion ensued regarding the pervasiveness of relational alienation and disharmony, especially during the crisis of COVID-19 and the massive losses families experienced due to the virus. A mutual agreement was concluded that there was a significant need for the project to launch. Marketing ensued via the church's website, upcoming events, email blasts, word of mouth, and social media solicitation.

The Bible study entitled “Conversations with the Father: Holding Space for Reconciliation” launched on February 9, 2022 and concluded on March 16, 2022. The sessions were held weekly from 7:00 pm to 8:30 pm. Engaging in a biblical exploration of the focal passage was an intralegal part of the project, which grounded the spiritual underpinning of reconciliation. The Bible study consisted of five weekly components, and the sixth component focused on one-on-one interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the weekly sessions were held virtually via Zoom. The one-on-one interviews were held virtually via Zoom and by telephone, whichever was most convenient for the participant.

The first week of “Conversations with the Father: Holding Space for Reconciliation” focused on dealing with family disappointment and examined chapter fifteen, verses eleven, and twelve of Luke’s gospel. The session opened with prayer and transitioned into the initial greeting and introductions. The doctoral study was introduced and included a brief overview of the journey that birthed the project. Through the unction of my spiritual autobiography coupled with the lessons gained from serving in my ministry context, the need was revealed for the church to support families desiring to move from relational alienation to harmony. After that, the Informed Consent Form was then reviewed in its entirety. Participants had an opportunity to present questions or concerns, and there were none. Instruction was provided for the signature and the return of the document of the Informed Consent Form.

Then the desired outcome of the Bible study was presented to the class. The expected results were 1) Increase the participants’ knowledge and skills regarding the spiritual discipline of reconciliation; 2) Gain skills to decrease emotional responses and

increase thoughtful responses to family stressors; 3) Gain skills that support relational harmony that may be applied to the participants' family situations; 4) Reduce beliefs and behaviors that lead participants to emotional cutoff and alienation, and 5) Lastly, the participants were to understand the believer's responsibility as a participant with God in the ministry of reconciliation. Instructions were then given for the completion of the pre- and post-surveys. The Survey Monkey link was provided to the participants via email through the Church Center electronic application at the end of class for the pre-survey completion.

The class group covenant was then reviewed, and participants had an opportunity to add things that were important to them, but nothing was added to the covenant. I then provided a historical introduction of Luke chapter fifteen and an in-depth analysis of chapter fifteen, verses eleven and twelve. The participants then engaged in the focus group discussion. In reading the focal pericope of Luke fifteen, verses eleven through thirty-two, the focus group discussion questions were how each family member in the parable managed family disappointment? How has your management of family disappointment been similar or different from the biblical passage? What highlights did you gain towards managing family disappointments spiritually may be applied to your family situations? The session concluded in prayer.

### *Week 1 Analysis*

Nineteen participants attended and engaged in a very robust conversation regarding what the younger son was entitled to financially. Much of the focus was on how wrong the younger son's actions were towards the family. There was disapproval of

how the younger son treated the father and the father's estate, which affected the entire family unit. Many disagreed with the imbalance of responsibility between the younger and elder sons. A shared insight gained was how perceptions of right and wrong and unmet expectations significantly impact family relationships. A second insight gained was acknowledging that we all make decisions that others forgive us, especially God. Thirdly, reconciliation involves accountability and maturity between all parties involved. Lastly, for reconciliation to take place, there must be forgiveness and agreement.

The second session focused on the consequences of detachment and examined verses thirteen through sixteen. The session opened with prayer and then moved into the check-in discussion of what is one thing that brings joy about being connected to the family? The conversation then transitioned into the recap of the highlights from the previous week's discussion that perceptions or misperceptions are significant contributors to creating divisions within the family.

The biblical exploration began with a reading of verses thirteen through sixteen. Participants then discussed their personal experiences of detachment. These experiences included physical and spiritual feelings of separation. Participants then viewed the YouTube video clip of the TV sitcom *Good Times*. In this episode, JJ and Dianna led their families in believing they were headed to the prom. Instead of attending the prom, they decided to leave their families to elope. The class discussed lessons learned from the video clip and how it parallels the story of the focal parable.

Class engagement then moved into the focus group discussion question. The questions were focused on detachment which is a common coping mechanism we use to manage or protect ourselves from disappointment and hurt. What are the relational and

spiritual consequences of division found in the parable? How might the highlights, if any, be applied to family situations? The session closed with prayer.

### *Week 2 Analysis*

Twenty-two participants attended the second session and very enthusiastically engaged in dialogue throughout the session. The opening discussion began with the question of what brings you joy about being connected to the family? The conversation then led to reflection and sharing about when we wandered away from family and or God and when we realized it was time to turn back. There was a notable shift in the participant's attitude toward the younger son. This attitude shift contributes to the reflection of our journey, which includes physical and spiritual wandering off. Participants acknowledged they did not like being in the space of separation from people they loved or from the God they worshiped. They described feelings of loneliness, sadness, and emptiness coupled with a longing to return but not knowing how to go about it. Throughout the session, the participants, male and female, were very engaged in discussing the text and the YouTube video clip of JJ and Diana.<sup>5</sup> The discussions revealed the total reliance upon a stranger for all the information the prodigal needed to sustain himself. Likewise, JJ and Diana depended on a stranger for all their necessities. The class also observed the parents' readiness to receive the children back home despite the children's misjudgment to leave. The discussion revealed to a participant that they needed to reach out to a family member that the entire family was upset with and let them know they were loved. This testimony illuminated how we as believers are to serve as

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Blount, *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 175.

light vessels within our families where darkness is all around our situations. God expects us to radiate his light in all places. Starting this session with personal examples of our wandering away from home set an atmosphere of compassion for the prodigal and a level of understanding that typically would have been blocked by our emotions of disappointment and rejection. Participants wanted to embrace rather than push away the family that had done wrong. Lastly, during this session, reconciliation was defined as returning to a state of peace. That state of peace will look different for each person, given their situation. Many reflections were provided, and the question was raised if there were levels to reconciliation. The class ran out of time before the inquiry could be resolved and was tabled for the next lesson.

Session 3 focused on The Turning Point or When it is Time to Go Back and examined verses seventeen through twenty-a. Prayer opened the session, followed by a check-in discussion of our experiences with having to go back home. The conversation moved into the recap of the previous week's attempt at defining reconciliation and answering the question are there levels of reconciliation. The biblical exploration began with reading Luke's gospel chapter fifteen, verses seventeen through twenty-a. After examining the text, the class participated in the focus group discussion. Would you consider your current living conditions so good that there is no need for you or your estranged family member to return home? Is it possible for you to be embraced or embrace others who may want to resume the family fellowship? What highlights, if any, did you gain towards receiving back what is lost that may be applied to your family situation? Lessons from the biblical exploration were wrapped-up with the YouTube

video of Bishop Nowel Jones, “There is No Ceiling,” time stamp 14:40-17:40. The session ended with prayer.

### *Week 3 Analysis*

There were sixteen participants in attendance. The church-wide Black University program affected the reduction in attendance in celebration of Black History Month. Participants engaged in defining what reconciliation meant to them. The common theme discussed was forgiveness, coming together, humility, and communication. It was determined that the foundation of forgiveness is grace, in that grace is extended before reconciliation occurs. Another key takeaway was identifying some indicators to recognize when a person is trying to return or restore a relationship, evidence of changed behavior, and openness to conversation.

The fourth session of “Conversations with the Father: Holding Space for Reconciliation” focused on somebody having to take a step and examine scriptural verses twenty-b through twenty-four. Prayer opened the session, followed by the check-in. Since engaging in this study, have you seen opportunities for reconciliation in your day-to-day activities for you or someone else? A recap of the previous weeks burning topic, are there levels of reconciliation given? The biblical exploration began with the scripture of verses twenty-b through twenty-four. Class engagement then transitioned into the focus group discussion, which was to name some of the practices of reconciliation displayed in the parable and explain how might they be applied in the spiritual practice of reconciliation? The session closed with a prayer.



*Week 4 Analysis*

Twenty-three participants attended and engaged in a robust conversation about what they were able to observe since engaging in the class regarding reconciliation in their daily lives. A participant who is a therapist shared that since attending the Bible study, they are listening with a different ear and noticing opportunities for reconciliation to discuss with clients that were not apparent before. Another participant who is also a therapist shared while working with a patient dealing with complicated grief. The therapist's ear was also alerted that the patient was dealing with a reconciliation issue. They were able to focus the session with the client on what the possibilities of reconciliation could look like for them. After discussing the matter, the patient gained a new level of understanding for their loved one and established peace. This discussion raised the awareness that reconciliation is still at work and is achievable even after death. The dialogue opened the door for other participants to understand their father's actions, acceptance was reached, and they attained reconciliation also after the death of their loved one. Others shared that they now make a conscious effort to view life from another person's perspective. They found themselves pausing a moment before responding to spouses or children, so there is no need to reconcile or apologize later. Another member shared that they gleaned that our charge is to be people builders, and we must give people what they need and not what they deserve. Likewise, the heavenly Father gives us love, compassion, forgiveness, and kindness and not what we deserve. Some saw themselves in a different role as the bridge between the family divide and was led to initiate reconnection.

The fifth session focused on Reframing the Mind's Eye. The scriptural foundation was verses twenty-five through thirty-two. The session opened with prayer and then moved into the check-in question, if you were facilitating this session, what one thing would you do differently that would be impactful for families? After the check-in discussion, the facilitation moved into a recap of the last session. The highlight from the previous session was the awareness that reconciliation can occur after the life of a loved one has ended. The discussion then transitioned to God's acceptance and realizing that we do not have to grovel for fellowship with God. He is ready and excited to accept us back into the family. Another discussion point was the observation that reconciliation occurs internally through forgiveness and repentance and externally through restored social and cultural acceptance.

The weekly biblical exploration focused on verses twenty-five through thirty-two. After an explanation of the focal text, the group focus discussion ensued. The discussion question was whether the Pharisees viewed the tax collectors and sinners as outcasts as they believed, "by their lifestyle they had chosen to deliberately opt-out of membership with the covenantal people of Israel and were considered outsiders and alienated from the blessing of God. They believed Jesus' association with the outsiders provided them inclusion in the kingdom of God, which they did not deserve, and their inclusion belittled the holiness of God and the Mosaic Covenant. The estranged brothers that Jesus shared a meal with were deemed unworthy of the Father's blessings, and their brothers in the Jewish community despised them. In the parable, Jesus attempts to reframe the mind's eye and extends an invitation of reconciliation to all. How might we reframe our

understanding of our father, mother, siblings, etc.? How, if any, does this reshape our understanding of the spiritual discipline of reconciliation?

Then instructions for the completion of the post-survey via Survey Monkey were provided. A solicitation of prayer requests was made. There were many issues in the hearts of the participants. The session closed by lifting the shared concerns in prayer.

### *Week 5 Analysis*

Nineteen participants engaged in the study this week, and the reduction in attendance was impacted by a special prayer all service for the diaconate at the exact date and time. The check-in conversation included preparing for the exchange, checking our motivation, checking the other person's emotional temperature, and planning to deal with a no or rejection. The class determined reconciliation cannot be forced upon anyone, and one must provide space for the other person to process and decide whether to enter reconciliation with us or not. Regardless of how we feel, the decision must be honored and allow grace to do the work if another opportunity arises.

The entire week of the sixth session was dedicated to conducting the one-on-one interviews. Twenty minutes were allotted for each interview discussion. The interviews were conducted on Tuesday, March 15<sup>th</sup>, Wednesday, March 16<sup>th</sup>, Thursday, March 17<sup>th</sup>, Friday, March 18<sup>th</sup>, and Saturday, March 19<sup>th</sup>. Ten participants voluntarily agreed to be interviewed by responding to four interview questions. The questions were provided to each participant before the interview via email.

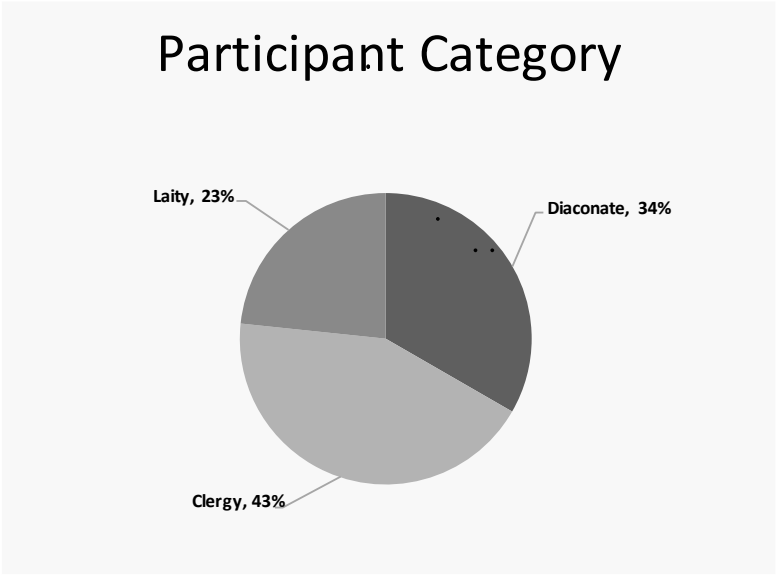
### **Summary of Learning**

Many lessons were gleaned through the project's design, implementation, data analysis, and participant and researcher engagement. The design and methodology of the project went as expected. In retrospect, having some foreknowledge of the types of relational estrangements before the sessions would have been beneficial to ensure facilitation directed its focus and resources in the desired areas. Four weeks was sufficient time to engage in the Bible study. The one-on-one interviews required at least two weeks to complete. The original project design was planned for ten to fifteen participants; however, due to the study's unexpected interest, there was a deviation from the fifteen-registration cutoff. Expanding the registration capacity resulted in thirty-nine registered participants, with an average of twenty participants each week. Another departure from the project design was failing to record the sessions via the Zoom recording capability. This departure was in response to a participant's request not to be recorded. Overall, the design and methodology were sufficient to support and test the hypothesis.

The implementation of the project was challenging to navigate as an observer and facilitator of the lesson, stimulating the discussion, notetaking, and completing the administrative task without creating unnatural pauses. As I hand-wrote notes, participants would fill in the conversation and experiences. I likely missed some comprehensive notes due to my responsibilities as the facilitator. In hindsight, some administrative tasks and notetaking could have been assigned to a willing participant. Another implementation challenge was the sessions conducted via Zoom due to COVID-19. Internet connectivity variances were something we had to work through but were a natural tolerance at this

point in our predominately virtual world since the pandemic. In reflection, the project implementation was sufficient to test and support the hypothesis. The census data revealed thirty-nine registrants, of which thirty participated in at least one session. The average weekly participation was twenty people. Three men actively participated, weekly, and their participation is notable since it is challenging to combine male and female dialogical participation on sensitive topic areas such as this one. Three married couples also participated in the study. Only one couple had a common concern of reconciling with a daughter. The other two couples had independent areas of interest regarding the desired relationships to reconcile.

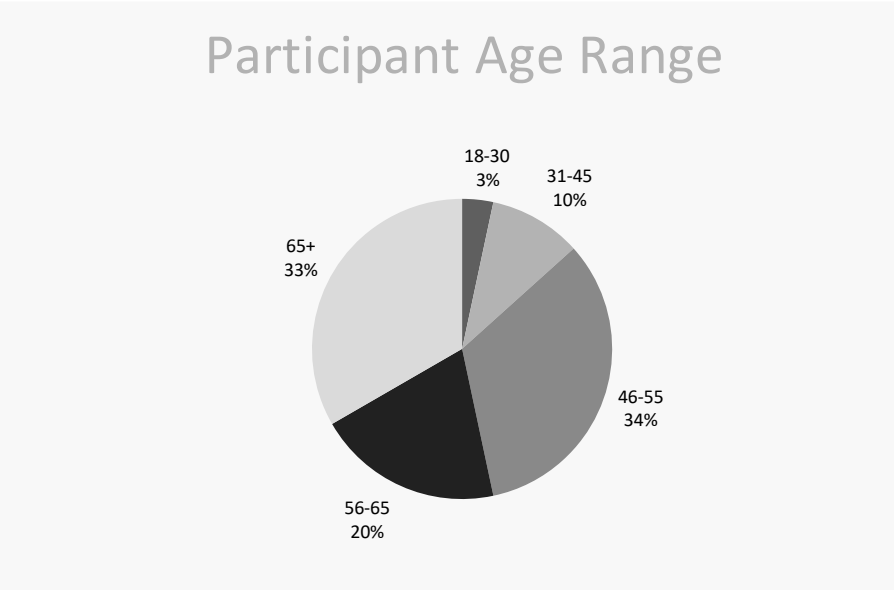
The participants' demographics were diaconate, clergy, and laity, shown in Figure one below. The participant diversity brought varying levels of Christian and non-Christian experiences and life perspectives into the conversation. The commonality within the group was the desire to study the word of God and their experiences with family disruption and disharmony.



Catagories	Number of Participants in Category	
Diaconate	10	10
Clergy	13	13
Laity	7	7
Total	30	30

Figure 1. Participant category demographic

Another notable demographical fact was that this topic resonated with people of all ages and stages in life. Future recruitment focus could be placed in the eighteen to thirty age range. Focusing on this age range could provide an opportunity to impart knowledge and build skills for the spiritual discipline of reconciliation for those with relatively limited life experiences with estrangement and reconciliation.



Ages	Number of Participants Per Age Range	
18-30	<div></div>	1
31-45	<div></div>	3
46-55	<div></div>	10
56-65	<div></div>	6
65+	<div></div>	10
Total		30

Figure 2. Age demographic of participants

*Analysis of Pre- and Post-Surveys*

A total of fifteen or fifty percent of the participants completed pre- and post-survey responses collected via the Survey Monkey automated tool. In support of the qualitative research design, the pre- and post-survey questions were open-ended. Respondents typed their narrative answers to each question. The Survey Monkey Tool automated word clouds of common words most mentioned. A common theme then consolidated those words to analyze knowledge and skill attainment.

*Question 1: How do you define reconciliation?*

This question is intended to measure the knowledge and skills gained by the participant before and after the Bible study. The data revealed similar common themes in the pre- and post-survey. The post-survey showed that knowledge attainment was achieved in understanding that reconciliation also encompasses reaching a state of peace about the relational situation. The mentions of peace included reaching a state of equilibrium or resolve within oneself, a level of stability about the problem and how to move forward, and achieving a mindset directed toward harmony rather than opposition.

Table 1. Common themes defining reconciliation pre- and post-survey

Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
Relationship/Unity/Coming Together (42)	Relationship/ Unity/Coming Together (39)
Peace (0)	Peace (8)

*Question 2: Have you engaged in reconciliation in your life?*

This pre-survey question measured the participants' knowledge, skill, and experience with reconciliation. The data revealed that ninety-eight percent of the participants have engaged in reconciliation, and seven percent have no experience with reconciliation. The study aimed to increase the knowledge and skills necessary for successful reconciliation.



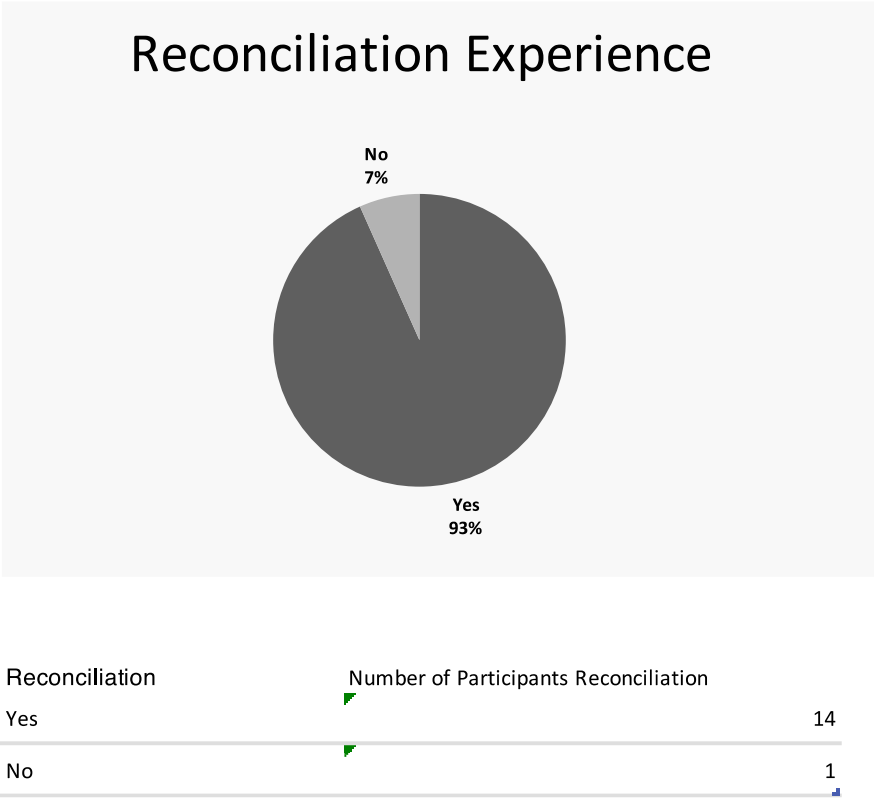


Figure 3. Experience engaging in reconciliation

*Question 3: Who do you believe is required to engage in reconciliation?*

This question is intended to measure the participants’ understanding of the believer’s responsibility in engaging in the ministry of reconciliation. There was an increased knowledge and a vested interest of the participants desiring to become third-party initiators of the initial reconciliation event. By the end of the session, the post-survey revealed that the participants understood that the responsibility to reconcile is not all on God, but believers have some responsibility. Lastly, the knowledge was gained that everyone is responsible for engaging, when possible, in restoring broken relationships.

Table 2. Who is required to engage in reconciliation

<b>Pre-Survey</b>	<b>Post-Survey</b>
Hurt Parties (17)	Hurt Parties (18)
God (6)	God (4)
Third-Party/ Responding to need (2)	Third-Party/ Responding to need (6)
No one (2)	No one (0)

*Question 4: What does the Bible say about reconciliation?*

This pre-survey question is intended to measure the participants' understanding of the believer's responsibility in engaging in the ministry of reconciliation. The data revealed that all participants understood Jesus as the example of reconciliation. We as believers are to forgive others as Jesus forgives us all. This question was not tested in the post survey, retrospect, including this measure in the post-survey could have provided data on who has God or humankind's more significant responsibility.

*Question 5: Have you witnessed other persons engage in reconciliation? If you have, what did you observe?*

This pre-survey question aimed to identify observed responses that may support relational harmony. The data revealed that one hundred percent of the participants have witnessed others engage in reconciliation. Observations were grouped by mentions of emotional and behavioral responses witnessed. Tears were the most emotional responses seen, and an apology was the most behavioral response observed.

Table 3. Observations of reconciliation experiences

<b>Emotional Responses</b>	<b>Behavioral Responses</b>
Tears (6)	Apology (8)
Embracing (3)	Accepting Responsibility (3)
Fussing (2)	Talking (3)
Hurt (1)	Forgiveness (2)
Joy (1)	Trust (1)

*Question 6: What are some of the practices of reconciliation?*

This question is intended to measure skills gained that support relational harmony that may be applied to their family situations. The responses revealed acceptance, compassion, and love were skills acquired by completing the study.

Table 4. Practices of reconciliation

Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
Forgiveness (12)	Forgiveness (9)
Understanding (5)	Understanding (4)
Listening (6)	Listening (13)
Healing (3)	Healing (0)
Take Responsibility (6)	Take Responsibility (0)
Repentance (2)	Repentance (4).
	*Acceptance (3)
	*Compassion (13)
	*Love (7)

*Question 7: What are the consequences and repercussions that people experience when they fail to reconcile their disagreements and differences with other persons?*

This question is intended to measure the knowledge and skills gained regarding the spiritual discipline of reconciliation. After the study, the post-survey revealed that participants acquired an understanding that unresolved disharmony can lead to an increase in physical or emotional medical afflictions. Additionally, they learned that prolonged detachment could result in stagnation in healthy relationships. In retrospect, this should have also been included in the pre-survey so readiness before and after the Bible study could have been measured.

Table 5. Consequences of failed reconciliation

Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
Medical (Physical/Emotional) (3)	Medical (Physical/Emotional) (9)
Anger/Resentment (7)	Anger/Resentment (4)
No Peace (7)	No Peace (2)
Loneliness (6)	Loneliness (0)
Guilt (3)	Guilt (0)
Stagnation (5)	Stagnation (7)
Hurt (7)	Hurt (1)
Loss (5)	Loss (2)

*Question 8: How ready are you to engage in reconciliation privately or assistance from alternative dispute resolution, mediation, or counseling to reconcile an estranged relationship?*

This question is intended to measure the readiness of participants to apply knowledge and skills gained to their family situations. The data revealed that eighty percent are ready to engage in reconciliation, thirteen percent are not, and seven percent are unsure.

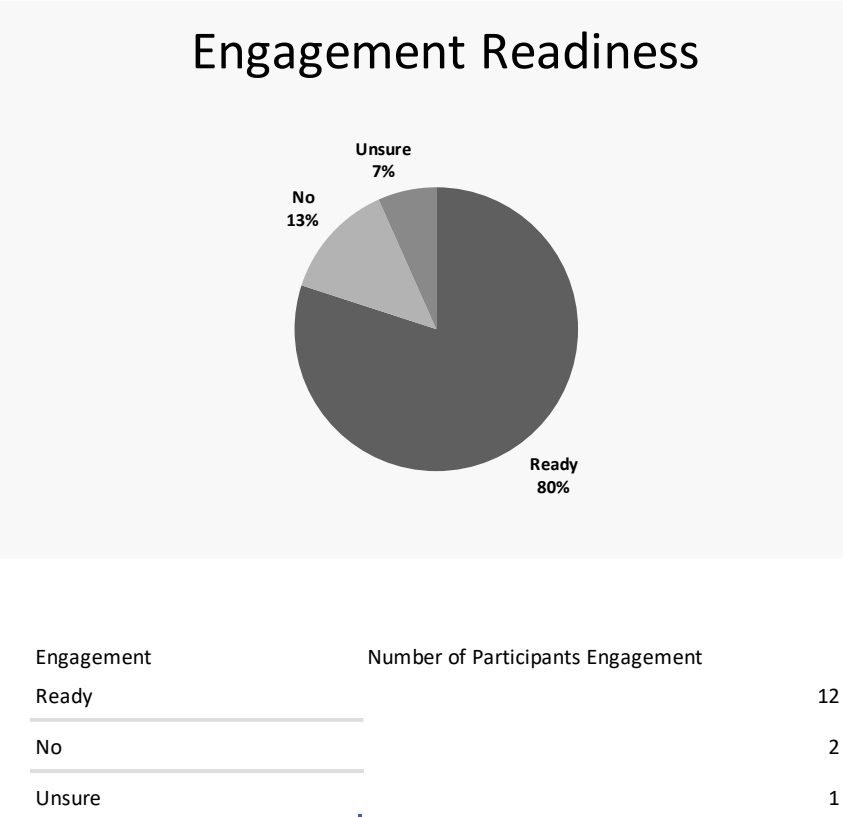


Figure 4. Readiness to engage in reconciliation

*Analysis of Focus Group Discussion*

The pre- and post-surveys confirmed knowledge and skill attainment was achieved. The focus group discussion and one-on-one interviews provided additional insights supporting the hypothesis.

*Week 1: In reading the focal pericope Luke 15:11-32, how did each family member in the Parable manage family disappointment? How has your management of family disappointment been similar or different from the biblical passage? What highlights did you gain towards managing family disappointment spiritually may be applied to our family situations?*

Misperceptions of a family member’s behavior and communication can further expatriate family disappointment and our determination of what constitutes right and

wrong. The lesson that may be applied is accepting other perspectives and committing to listening to understand rather than respond.

*Week 2: Detachment is a common coping mechanism we use to manage or protect ourselves from disappointment and hurt. What are the relational and spiritual consequences of detachment found in the Parable? How might the highlights, if any, be applied to your family situations?*

Living detached is not a pleasant experience for anyone involved, and its effects extend beyond the nuclear family members to extended family members and even close family friends. The dependency upon unfamiliar systems for support when detached from family can be dangerous, and the effects of loneliness can have emotional and physical medical repercussions. As ministers of reconciliation, the lesson application is to manifest this ministry by serving as bridgers of relationships seeking opportunities to restore hope and harmony with others.

*Week 3: Would you consider your current living conditions so good that there is no need for you or your estranged family member to return home? Is it possible for you to be embraced or embrace others who may want to resume family fellowship? What highlights, if any, did you gain towards receiving back what is lost that may be applied to your family situations?*

Although some relationships are better off apart, it is better to restore peace than to live in disharmony or a state of unrest when possible. The highlight gained was the persons actively seeking if opportunities for restoration were present and, if so, prayerfully planning to take advantage of the opportunity.

*Week 4: Name some of the practices of reconciliation displayed in the Parable; how might they be applied in your spiritual practice of reconciliation?*

In the parable, the father recognizes that his two sons are in different stages of life, and although the two are brothers, the father accepts that they will not travel the same journey. As we engage in the spiritual practice of reconciliation, there must be an acceptance of varying maturity levels and life experiences and a tolerance that mistakes will be made. The application is demonstrated by the father's ability to move beyond the error and even cover his son's filth with a clean new robe.

*Week 5: The Pharisees viewed the tax collectors and sinners as outcasts; they believed, "by their lifestyle they had chosen to deliberately opt-out of membership of the covenantal people of Israel and were considered outsiders and alienated from the blessings of God. They believed Jesus' association with the outsiders provided them inclusion in the Kingdom of God, which they did not deserve, and their inclusion belittled the holiness of God and the Mosaic Covenant. The estranged brothers that Jesus shared a meal with were deemed unworthy of the Father's blessings, and their brothers in the Jewish community despised them. In the Parable, Jesus attempts to reframe the mind's eye and extend an invitation of reconciliation to all. How might we reframe our understanding of our father, mother, siblings, etc.? How, if any, does this reshape our understanding of the spiritual discipline of reconciliation?*

Perceptions are managed through our compassion for others and an examination of our self-righteous beliefs about ourselves. We have all been wrong in our dealing with God and humankind at some point, yet by his grace, we have a relationship with a God who loves us. Lest we never forget the processes that led us to our changed hearts.

#### *Analysis of One-On-One Interviews*

Ten participants, thirty-three percent of the population, voluntarily agreed to be interviewed. The interviews lasted approximately twenty minutes each and spanned Tuesday through Saturday during the sixth week of the project. Questions one and four

were the interview questions that most supported the hypothesis and informed the project's outcome. Questions two and three provided the least information in support of the hypothesis.

1. Share the knowledge and skills gained from the Bible study you intended to use?

The knowledge and skills gained were categorized by common themes discussed during the interviews. The themes were behavioral changes the participants intended to make due to the study, changes in beliefs, and an intended plan of action with their family members. The most common behavioral change discussed by the participants was their need to engage in active listening with the offended party, their awareness and control of their emotional triggers, which result in offensive behavior and unintended words and pausing before reacting. The change in beliefs gleaned is that there is always another perspective, and as believers, we are to be people builders and, as such, give people what they need rather than what we deem they deserve. Notable plans of action or takeaways from the study are accessing the temperature for the opportunity or willingness to engage the other party in reconciliation by being the light within the family to promote reconciliation, to let estranged persons know they are loved, or to return whenever possible.



Table 6. Participant knowledge and skill attainment

Behavior	Beliefs	Plan of Action
Active listening	There is another perspective	Access temperature for readiness to engage
Awareness of emotional triggers	We are people builders	Be a light in the darkness
Pause or be still before reacting	Give others what they need, not what they deserve	Initiate the return
Forgiveness	Release A.N.T.s (Automatic Negative Thoughts)	

2. What knowledge or skills have you gained to help you recognize when a family member is trying to return from alienation and restore harmony?

The most common response was evidence of changed behavior and the willingness of the estranged parties to engage in conversation.

3. When you recognize disappointment within the family, what knowledge or skills have you gained to decrease emotional responses and increase thoughtful responses?

Skills gained were controlling initial reactions, pausing before speaking, and considering the other person's perspective.

4. Is there a relationship you would like to reconcile?

- a. Spouse/Partner/Significant Other
- b. Parent/Child
- c. Sibling/Sibling
- d. Other (please specify)

This data circumstantiates that family disharmony exists beyond the nuclear family and impacts the entire family unit. The post-survey results reveal that most

participants desired to reconcile with an extended family member such as aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews than any other category. The second was the desire to reconcile relationships between parents and children.

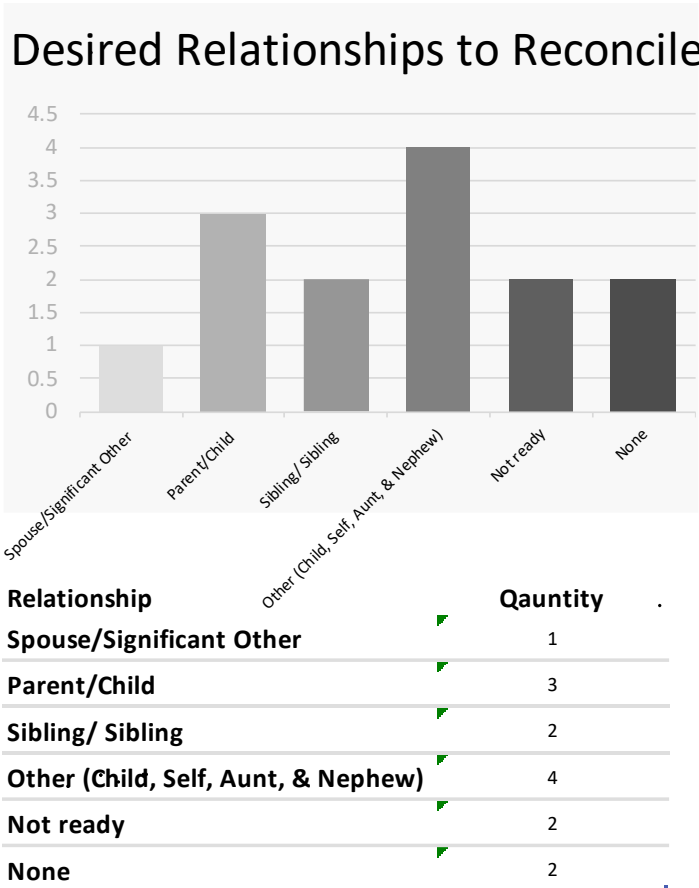


Figure 5. The desired relationship to reconcile

The biblical exploration of the spiritual disciplines of reconciliation is a tool provided to solve the problem of family estrangement and disharmony among the congregants of The New Psalmist Baptist Church. The Bible study, “Conversations with the Father: Holding Space for Reconciliation,” provided spiritual support to persons affected by estrangement to help them grow from relational alienation to harmony. The pre- and post-survey data, focus group discussion, and interviews supported the

hypothesis. As knowledge and skills were obtained, more participants than not were ready to implement what they had learned in their family situations.

### **Conclusion**

The project proved that the church of the Lord, Jesus Christ, has a message and ministry to support family reconciliation. In summation the project worked exceptionally well. Each week there were new interests expressed to attend the sessions. Several people requested the sessions become a regular offering in our Connection Group offerings. One member asked that I bring the group back and preach a sermon from the focal text. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was conducted via Zoom and was subject to technology glitches and user errors; however, the sessions ran smoothly. All participants were versed in the Zoom application and tolerant of minor glitches. There was little to no background noise during the session at all times. The weekly number of participants and the level of excitement about the subject matter exceeded my expectations. Nearly each week a new person joined the session and added to the conversation. Men and women were very interested in the study and communicated how helpful the study was each week. Shortly after the study ended, two participants initiated reconciliation with their family through a family lunch and the other a family dialogue session to support reconciliation between estranged family members. Both reported that their attempts were received positively, and successful engagement occurred.

Essential elements gained by the participants were understanding that every believer has a role and responsibility in engaging in reconciliation whenever possible. An essential component of reconciliation is restoring to a state of peace. This peace does not

mean the relationship will be like it was, but the parties can find a means to co-exist harmoniously. Thirdly, there are no levels of reconciliation, the relationship is either reconciled or it is not. God does not reconcile us a little bit today and little tomorrow. When Jesus reconciled us back to the Father, we entered complete harmony of his fellowship. Likewise, reconciliation is not a partial option for us. Harmony is the goal to be achieved.

The three critical takeaways gleaned as a developer and facilitator of the study are that the ministry of reconciliation is a hot topic that the community is excited to engage with their church leaders and fellow congregants. Secondly, people of all ages and stages desire to resolve family disharmony and space to attain skills to experience better relations with their family members. Thirdly, this project and its manuscript are transportable in practice and theory. Its successful implementation via Zoom allows for facilitation around the world. Its principles are tangible to assist another ministry context and serve as a tool to bridge harmony where relational estrangement is present. For example, as the nation continues its transition out of its nearly two-year isolation and practices of social distancing due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the needs of the community and congregation will require diverse approaches to support them effectively. Every community, nationally and internationally, was impacted by periods of family strain. This project model is a guide to strengthening those family connections.

Additionally, discussions with my peer associate illuminated another example of the project's transportability in her ministry context in Nigeria. The peer associate expressed that the project could benefit her fellow Nigerians, where religious and political clashes frequently result in splits between family members.

The opportunities for improvement would be to shift the project focus from knowledge attainment to raising awareness, enhancing skills, and building safe spaces to handle difficult experiences, whereby church leadership and laity can minister to and assist congregants to move from relational alienation to harmony. Additional improvements are to keep the cohort of participants small, averaging between ten to fifteen. A smaller cohort will provide a safe space for participants to share more about the struggles they are experiencing and the help they seek regarding family reconciliation. Also, four weeks was ample enough time to study the pericope and engage in discussion. Lastly, participants were very interested in learning about spiritual detachment and relational alienation from God. A module on spiritual reconciliation will be added to the curriculum. Further additions to the curriculum will be a module on how to start the conversation toward reconciliation and check the emotional temperature to determine if someone is ready to engage in reconciliation.

The project has confirmed my passion for small group ministry. As well as programmatic design, development, and its implementation. The project further illuminated my passion for building and strengthening connections between families, the church, the community, and the world. I intend to pursue my coaching certification in conflict resolution to equip me for this work further. I will continue facilitating the project within my context and as invited. Other aspirations for this project are to expand and provide training to church leadership, clergy, and laypersons on ministering to a congregant and their family members, seeking reconciliation among nuclear family members and church family members. This teaching will become a tool to raise awareness regarding the Christian responsibility to reconcile when possible. And further

consideration is given to submitting this research to Christian Journals publication to raise awareness of the problem further and provide education for the Christian community handling the issue.

**APPENDIX A**  
**GROUP COVENANT**

## Group Covenant

I commit to helping to make the group a community of trust and a safe place, by observing the following guidelines:

- ❖ What we say in the group stays in the group. What we share is confidential. Because we are in a virtual environment, find a space where you can be alone and where others in your home cannot overhear the conversation online. If you cannot be in a separate space, please use headphones.
- ❖ We talk about our own experience, not someone else's using "I" statements.
- ❖ We honor the thoughts and opinions of others. We recognize and value differences.
- ❖ We demonstrate compassion and empathy and refrain from judging.
- ❖ We refrain from trying to "fix" anyone.
- ❖ We listen to each other and have one conversation at a time.
- ❖ We celebrate each other.
- ❖ We pray for one another.
- ❖ We commit to regular attendance and agree to communicate with the facilitator if we are unable to attend for some reason.



**APPENDIX B**  
**PRE-SURVEY**

## Pre-Survey

1. How do you define reconciliation?
2. Have you engaged in reconciliation in your life?
3. Who do you believe is required to engage in reconciliation?
4. What does the Bible say about reconciliation?
5. Have you witnessed other persons engage in reconciliation? If you have, what did you observe?
6. What are some of the practices of reconciliation?
7. What are the consequences and repercussions that people experience when they fail to reconcile their disagreements and or differences with other persons?

**APPENDIX C**  
**POST-SURVEY**

## Post-Survey

1. How do you define reconciliation?
2. Who do you believe is required to engage in reconciliation?
3. What does the Bible say about reconciliation?
4. What are some of the practices of reconciliation?
5. What are the consequences and repercussions that people experience when they fail to reconcile their disagreements and or differences with others?
6. How ready are you to engage in reconciliation privately or with assistance from alternative dispute resolution, mediation, or counseling to reconcile an estranged relationship?

**APPENDIX D**  
**LESSON PLAN**

## Lesson Plan

## Week One: The theme focused on Dealing with Family Disappointment

- a) Opening Prayer
- b) Greetings and introductions
- c) Introduction to doctoral study
- d) Review of Informed Consent Form
- e) Instructions for pre & post surveys
- f) Review of class covenant
- g) Introduction of Luke chapter fifteen
- h) Focus group discussion
- i) Closing Prayer

## Week Two: The Theme focused on The Consequences of Detachment

- a) Opening Prayer
- b) Check-in/Ice Breaker:
- c) Recap last week – Perceptions create divisions
- d) Scripture verses thirteen through sixteen
- e) Viewed the YouTube video clip of the TV sitcom Good Times.
- f) Focus group discussion question, detachment is a common coping mechanism we use to manage or protect ourselves from disappointment and hurt. What are the relational and spiritual consequences of detachment found in the parable? How might the highlights, if any, be applied to your family situations?

## g) Closing Prayer

## Session 3: Theme Focused on The Turning Point or When it is Time to Go Back

- a) Opening Prayer
- b) Check-in/icebreaker
- c) Recap last week – Defining Reconciliation
- d) Scripture focus on verses seventeen through twenty-a
- e) Focus group discussion, would you consider your current living conditions so good that there is no need for you or your estranged family member to return home? Is it possible for you to be embraced or for you to embrace others who may want to resume the family fellowship? What highlights, if any, did you gain towards receiving back what is lost that may be applied to your family situation?
- f) Lesson wrap-up with YouTube Bishop Noel Jones, *There is no ceiling*, time stamp 14:40-17:40
- g) Closing Prayer

## Session 4: Themes focused on Somebody has to take a step

- a) Opening Prayer
- b) Check-in/icebreaker: Have you seen opportunities for reconciliation in your day-to-day activities for you or someone else?
- c) Recap last week – Are there levels to reconciliation?
- d) Scripture focus on verses twenty-b through twenty-four

- e) Group focus discussion, name some of the practices of reconciliation displayed in the parable; how might they be applied in your spiritual practice of reconciliation?
- f) Closing Prayer

#### Session 5: Theme focused on Reframing the Mind's Eye

- a) Opening Prayer
- b) Check-in/icebreaker: If you were facilitating this session, what one thing would you do differently that would be impactful for families?
- c) Recap last week: Reconciliation can occur after life has ended. We don't have to grieve for fellowship with God. He is ready and excited to accept us back into the family. There are different acts of reconciliation a) external, the grace we extend externally, b) spiritual, and c) social/cultural xxx.
- d) Scripture focus on verses twenty-five through thirty-two
- e) Group focus discussion, The Pharisees viewed the tax collectors and sinners as outcasts; they believed, "by their lifestyle they had chosen to deliberately opt-out of membership with the covenantal people of Israel and were considered outsiders and alienated from the blessing of God. They believed Jesus' association with the outsiders provided them inclusion in the Kingdom of God, which they did not deserve, and their inclusion belittled the holiness of God and the Mosaic Covenant. The estranged brothers that Jesus shared a meal with were deemed unworthy of the father's blessings, and their brothers in the Jewish community despised them. In the parable, Jesus attempts to



reframe the mind's eye and extends an invitation of reconciliation to all. How might we reframe our understanding of our father, mother, siblings, etc.?

How, if any, does this reshape our understanding of the spiritual discipline of reconciliation?

- f) Administer post-test via Survey Monkey
- g) Prayer Request & Closing Prayer

Week 6: One-on-One Interviews

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